

Revisiting the Poetic Edda

**Revisiting the Poetic Edda.
Essays on Old Norse Heroic
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REVISITING
THE POETIC EDDA
Essays on Old Norse Heroic Legend



Edited by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington

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Revisiting the Poetic Edda

Bringing alive the dramatic poems of Old Norse heroic legend, this new collection offers accessible, ground-breaking and inspiring essays which introduce and analyze the exciting legends of the two doomed Helgis and their valkyrie lovers; the dragon-slayer Sigurðr; Brynhildr the implacable shield-maiden; tragic Guðrún and her children; Attila the Hun (from a Norse perspective!); and greedy King Fróði, whose name lives on in Tolkien's Frodo. The book provides a comprehensive introduction to the poems for students, taking a number of fresh, theoretically-sophisticated and productive approaches to the poetry and its characters. Contributors bring to bear insights generated by comparative study, speech act and feminist theory, queer theory and psychoanalytic theory (among others) to raise new, probing questions about the heroic poetry and its reception.

Each essay is accompanied by up-to-date lists of further reading and a contextualization of the poems or texts discussed in critical history. Drawing on the latest international studies of the poems in their manuscript context, and written by experts in their individual fields, engaging with the texts in their original language and context, but presented with full translations, this companion volume to *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology* (Routledge, 2002) is accessible to students and illuminating for experts. Essays also examine the afterlife of the heroic poems in Norse legendary saga, late medieval Icelandic poetry, the nineteenth-century operas of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and the recently published (posthumous) poem by Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*.

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Foreword

Tom Shippey

A heroic image of the Old North is by now deeply fixed in popular consciousness. Who can forget Kirk Douglas as Einar Ragnarsson in the 1958 movie *The Vikings*, mortally wounded by his half-brother and pleading mutely, not for help or mercy but for a sword to be put in his hand so that he can go to his god Odin like a Viking and be carried off to Valhalla by Odin's valkyries? The whole image complex has long been an embarrassment to scholars, who explain patiently and repeatedly that whatever Astérix the Gaul may say, Norsemen did not habitually drink out of their enemies' skulls,¹ a belief founded on an ancient mistranslation;² that there is little evidence for an organized Odinic religion, only for diversified and often local cults; that Valhalla really should be Valhöll; and so on. The scholarly explanations so far have not carried much weight. The fact is that the images of the Viking berserker and the Viking funeral have now "gone viral," along with much of Norse mythology, to be used in historical fiction, fantasy fiction, comic books, and heavy metal music. One of the signs that something has gone viral is the fact that no one can trace exact sources any longer. Even the scriptwriters for movies like Kenneth Branagh's *Thor* and Christopher Ray's *Almighty Thor* (both 2011) probably could not say where their ideas and images originated.

The universal familiarity of this quasi-heroic ideal is especially surprising when one considers how "narrow-shouldered" it is, to use a phrase from the stock market. If Snorri Sturluson, in the thirteenth century, had not written his *Prose Edda*, and in particular the *Gylfaginning* section of it, with its extended description of Valhalla and the fateful statement that "all those who fall in battle are [Odin's] adopted sons" (*óskasynir eru allir þeir er í val falla*),³ and if Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson, in the seventeenth century, had not taken into safe keeping the major manuscript of Eddic poems now known as the

Codex Regius, found in an unknown Icelandic farmhouse, then the majority of the texts transmitting Old Norse heroic legend would have been unknown. Also in the seventeenth century, the young enthusiast Thomas Bartholinus might not have written his “Three books on the causes of contempt for death among the still-pagan Danes” (*De causis contemptae a Danis adhuc gentilibus mortis*, 1689), a work that caught the attention of the learned European world, held it for more than a century, and is still echoed at many removes in the popular images of today (including, in addition to the Viking “contempt for death” of his title, the role of valkyries, Valhalla, and the special fate of those who die in battle).

Why should such works, coming from remote Iceland, not written in the languages of learning, and to begin with barely comprehensible, have made such a deep and lasting impression? Scandinavian nationalism and the search for noble origins were no doubt the first motive, but the poems and stories soon spread beyond Scandinavia. There are two more general reasons, one historical, one literary.

The historical reason was a growing realisation that there was something recognizable in the heroic poems of what came to be called “the Elder Edda,” if not in the mythical ones. It was soon noticed that the Gothic king Iörmunrekkr who appears in *Hamðismál*, where he has his arms and legs cut off by the brothers Hamðir and Sörli in revenge for his execution of their half-sister Svanhildr, must be the king already familiar, as Hermanaricus, from the Roman historians Ammianus Marcellinus in the fourth century, and Jordanes two centuries later. Ammianus reported that the king had committed suicide in despair at defeat by the Huns,⁴ while Jordanes’s story was that he had been killed by the brothers Ammius and Sorlius in revenge for the death of their sister Sunilda.⁵ The earlier story sounds more plausible, but the later one is clearly much the same as the one in the Old Norse poem, though the poem must be at least four centuries later. Jordanes shows that a story, and perhaps poems, about King (H)ermanaric must have been circulating by the mid-sixth century, most probably in Gothic.

The Atli of the poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* was even easier to identify. He must be Attila, the Hun king, the famous Scourge of God. Even his name, it was belatedly realized, was Gothic. It must have been a nickname, a diminutive of Gothic *atta*, “father,” so “little father.” The account of his death in the two Norse poems—betrayed and killed by his avenging fury of a wife Guðrún—hardly squares at all with the more prosaic account given by his contemporary, the

Byzantine historian Priscus, which is that he died of a nosebleed on the night after his marriage to a lady called Ildico (possibly a Gothic name). But as Ursula Dronke suggests, the story in the Norse poems could have arisen from contemporary rumor.⁶ It is as if the Khan's bodyguards' first thought, that there must have been foul play, went into circulation before the truth was realized, or as if others had simply refused to believe in a mere nosebleed: was the only person present, the woman, not from an enemy nation?

The plot was thickened by a further realization, namely, that the character in the Norse poems, Guðrún's brother Gunnarr son of Gjúki, could also be identified as a king of the Burgundians, Gundaharius son of Gibicha, mentioned by two contemporary chroniclers as well as the slightly later *Lex Burgundionum*.⁷ Gundahari was indeed destroyed along with his kingdom by a Hunnish assault in 437 AD: though not by Attila (who died sixteen years later), and not in the dramatic circumstances of the Norse poems, playing his harp defiantly in the snake-pit. The Þiðrekr of other Norse and German texts, in which he is drawn into the legendary orbit of the Nibelungs, was furthermore readily identifiable as King Theodric the Great (died 526), a Gothic king generations later than Ermanaric and Attila. The chronology did not work at all, and the Norse accounts were usually incompatible with those of Roman and Byzantine historians. Still, the conviction grew that there was something in it or something behind it. And as the many attempts to historicize "King Arthur" have shown, there is nothing more attractive to the modern rewriter, scholarly or popular, than the thought of getting through a legend to what must have been the true story behind it.

Conviction was increased by the nineteenth-century discoveries of Germanic philology. The Gundahari/Gunnar/(Old English) Guthere equation was rendered completely convincing by awareness that the names had gone through precisely correct processes of linguistic change. *Hlöðskviða* (part of the *Eddica minora*)⁸ was corroborated first by the fact that names found in the same line of the Old English poem *Widsiþ* (115), Heaþoric, Hliþe, and Incgenþeow, appear to be the same as those of two half-brothers in the Norse poem and the saga surrounding it, Hlöðr and Angantýr, as well as their father Heiðrekr: so there was a story about them in wide circulation, not just in Scandinavia. And once again the origin must surely have been a Gothic one, for *Widsiþ* ascribes that whole batch of heroes to a time when "the army of the Hræd[e]"—the Hreth-Goths?—"had with hard swords to defend their ancient throne against the men of Attila around

the wood of the Vistula.”

Christopher Tolkien, in an extended study of *Hlödskviða* (also known as “The Battle of the Goths and Huns”) regretfully concluded that there was no way to identify the events of the poem, and the saga in which it is embedded, with what little information about battles on the steppe that reached the Classical world;⁹ but noted further that the place-name *Harvaðafjöll*, found in a verse-fragment in the saga, was an exact phonetic descendant of **karpāt-*, “regularly transformed into **ǵarfap-* by the operation of the Germanic Consonant Shift” and must mean the Carpathian mountains.¹⁰ Name and place no longer meant anything to Norse poets, but they had preserved the name correctly, and the place was consistent with the “Vistula wood” of *Widsiþ*. Once again, there was something behind it—and maybe more to discover. The last thought led generations of scholars into attempts to trace how Norse, English, and German stories had been passed on, involving complex theories of Gothic, Vandalic, Herulian, or Lombard mercenaries returning home to the North bearing tales with them or perhaps swapping them as Varangian guardsmen in Byzantium. The whole industry reached a peak with Hermann Schneider’s two-volume *Germanische Heldensage* (1928–1934). J. R. R. Tolkien’s signed copy of this is (or used to be) in the Taylorian Library at Oxford.

The big disappointment, however, was what one might call the pre-Nibelung story of Sigurðr, or Siegfried, and Brynhildr, which makes up a majority of the heroic poems in the Eddic corpus and would make up more if it were not for the notorious missing eight pages in the middle. Gregory of Tours’s *Historia Francorum*, written in the late sixth century (Gregory died in 594), has a good deal to say, especially in Book IV, about a Gothic princess Brunhild and her husband, the Frankish king Sigibert.¹¹ Points of similarity are that Sigibert fought the Huns (but Sigurðr did not, though the Nibelungs did), his name begins with the Sigi-prototHEME (but this was a common one, Gregory mentioning more than a dozen others), he was assassinated by treachery (like many Merovingians), and Brunhild was extremely distressed at his murder (though not to the point of suicide, for she long outlived her chronicler Gregory). The similarities are no better than general, and the identification has found little favor.

The disappointment, however, led to another once-popular view, which solved two embarrassments at once.¹² German patriots of the nineteenth century found it distressing that none of the rediscovered Germanic poetry or legend (Norse, English, German) contained any trace of the hero Arminius, whose defeat of the Roman general Varus

in the Teutoburger Wald in AD 9, with the annihilation of his three legions, kept most of “Germania” permanently free of the Roman Empire: the English writer Sir Edward Creasy listed it in 1851 as one of his “Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World” (and also argued that while Arminius was not exactly English, the English, as Saxons, were closer kin to him than modern Germans). Perhaps, patriots suggested, Arminius was just what the Romans called him, and his Germanic name was really—well, Sigefrith, or something similar. His brother, after all, was called Segestes even by the Romans. If this were the case, then the other embarrassing gap, a poetic hero (Siegfried) without a historical model, could be remedied by matching him to a historical model (Arminius) without poetic descendants. But this theory too looked like a clutch at a straw, though it did not invalidate the more convincing equations mentioned above.

The other reason for the dissemination of the Norse heroic image, and one that has become increasingly rather than decreasingly attractive, is the literary one. Put simply, there is little poetry in the world like Eddic poetry. And it is moreover markedly different even from the heroic poetry of Greece, Rome, and England with which it has often been compared. It introduced a new literary sensation to the European world: one of “Gothic” extremism, fierce, macabre, often cruel, and sometimes (in a cruel kind of way) rather funny. This too has become something of an embarrassment for modern scholars, but the world outside scholarship has long been riveted by it.

Among its stylistic qualities (they are all connected) are enigma, surprise, allusion, concision—and one for which we have no obvious name. Taking enigma first, one might wonder, reading *Atlakviða*, why in the world Gunnarr decides *sem konungr skyldi*, “as a king should,” to take the bait offered by Atli and ride to visit him? He knows it is a trap. The bait of riches offered means nothing to the Nibelung kings, the richest men in the world. And he has already decided otherwise. The only answer seems to be that he reverses his decision *because he has been warned*. Now he has been warned of danger, not going might look—to anyone really unobservant—as if he were afraid? Guðrún’s well-meant wolf-hair has acted as the opposite of a dare. Gunnarr’s behavior is weird, even suicidal, but not incomprehensible within its own value system.

Surprise: in the same poem, and in *Atlamál*, why does Gunnarr demand his brother Högni’s heart before he will answer questions about the Nibelung treasure? The answer, when it comes, is satisfying within the same value system. Gunnarr loves his brother, as he shows

by his approving commentary on the heart—hard, unflinching, the heart of a warrior—and it may not be the case that he does not trust him. What is the case is that he has complete trust in himself. Once Högni is dead, there is only one person who knows where the hoard is, and that makes the secret completely sure. As saga heroes sometimes say when asked what they believe in, the right answer is, “I believe in me myself” (*Ek trúi á sjálfan mik*).¹³

Allusion and concision: in *Hamðismál*, the conversation between Erpr and his two half-brothers, Hamðir and Sörli, has long seemed inscrutable. The first clue to follow is perhaps that while Erpr is a blood relation of his half-brothers—they share a father, but not a mother—he has no blood relationship at all with the half-sister they are riding to avenge, she being the child of their mother by a different father. His offer to join their suicide mission is accordingly a generous one, showing that he takes an inclusive view of family responsibility. What he wants is a reciprocal acknowledgment. He wants his half-brothers to call him “brother.” They refuse to do so, realising their mistake, and using the word *bróðir* (st. 28), only when it is too late.¹⁴ In *Hlöðskviða* we have what is almost a reversal of the scene. There Hlöðr and Angantýr are again half-brothers, though Hlöðr is not legitimate. On their father’s death, however, Angantýr, like Erpr, is ready to take a broad view of their relationship. Almost the first word he says, when Hlöðr comes to claim inheritance, is *bróðir*. Whether their negotiation would have proved successful—Angantýr offers a third, Hlöðr wants half—we cannot tell, for it is broken off by the fateful words of Gizurr, which have to be quoted in the original language. He says, on hearing the offer:

Þetta er þiggjanda / þýjar barni,
barni þýjar, / þótt sé borinn konungi.

Catching the full force of this in modern English is not easy, especially the contemptuous subjunctive *sé*. One might suggest, “That’s an offer that can’t be refused, not by a bondmaid’s child, yes, a bondmaid’s child, fathered by a king *though he may have been*.” But the English phrasing is more than twice as long as the Norse, and in the Norse Gizurr’s insult is reinforced by alliteration and chiasmus.

Behind all these features of literary style, one should add, there lies a consistent attitude that has been readily understood and passed on into popular culture, though we have no agreed name for it. The poets, and the culture that produced them, seem to have regarded self-control and self-possession as the highest virtues. They are habitual

understaters. They present heroes whose response to disaster is irony or silence. “Banding words” (*málom skipta*) is rebuked by Helgi in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana inn fyrri* and again by Sörli in *Hamðismál*. Sometimes we are asked to notice unconscious self-betrayal by a look or gesture. In the mythological Eddic poem *Völundarkviða*, when Völundr is trapped, robbed, and enslaved by King Niðhad, he naturally says nothing, but Niðhad’s wife notices his response to the taking of his wife’s ring: “his eyes are like a shining serpent’s” (*ámun ero augo ormi þeim inom frána*). In Snorri’s tale of Thor’s visit to Útgardar-Loki, when Thor finds out that one of his magic goats has been crippled, he says nothing, but “his knuckles whitened” (*hvítuðu knúarnir*) on the haft of his hammer. The author of *Völsunga saga* quotes a stanza from an Eddic Sigurðr poem that has not survived, which says that after Brynhildr rejected his offer to repudiate Guðrún and marry her, Sigurðr turned away, once more saying nothing: but in his grief, his chest swelled so much that the links of his chain-mail burst.

Though the heroes may choose not to speak, however, heroines have different speech privileges, and one of their privileges is the right to lament. So we have the laments of Sváva and Sigrún in the Helgi poems, of Guðrún in the second *Guðrúnarkviða*, and of Oddrún in *Oddrúnargrátr*. This does not mean that they are any less committed to the heroic idea than the heroes, as Guðrún shows by sending her sons off to certain death, and by her stony—or is it fierce?—inability to weep in the first *Guðrúnarkviða*. Brynhildr is as unyielding as any of the Eddic menfolk and as set on revenge, though she does not take her revenges in person. Her laugh of triumph when she hears her rival weeping is climactic in both the “Sigurðr Fragment,” *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (st. 10), and (in almost the same words) in “The Short Lay of Sigurðr,” *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st. 32). The giantess slaves of *Grottasöngur* combine lament with rage and magical vengeance.

Popular though Vikings and Viking imagery have become, much of the above has just been too tough for modern taste. Rewriters of the Völ-sung/Nibelung story have consistently shied away from its more disturbing aspects. Hollywood has produced makeovers of Homer and King Arthur and (several times) *Beowulf*, and it has borrowed Norse mythology enthusiastically but has left the *Poetic Edda* alone. One can see why. The Eddic poets did not do happy endings, and the poems repeatedly express the conviction that heroes and heroines show their true quality not through success but in defeat, nowadays an unpalatable thought. Nevertheless, the heroic poems of the *Edda*

deserve respectful attention for two reasons. One is that they so nearly vanished from the world: it would have been a major loss, both of great poetry and of a cultural perspective alien to us, but not completely incomprehensible. The other is that though they may have survived for the most part in a single manuscript, they are clearly not the work of one great master-writer but express a collective poetic through individual talents, sometimes sharply distinctive.

Notes

1. In René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo's *Astérix et les Normands* (1966), the Normans or Norsemen habitually offer each other "a skull": "O non, je ne refuse jamais un petit crâne."
2. Detailed by Margaret Clunies Ross, *The Old Norse Poetic Translations of Thomas Percy: A New Edition and Commentary, Making the Middle Ages*. Vol. 4. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002.
3. Snorri Sturluson, *Edda*, trans. Anthony Faulkes. London: J. M. Dent, 1987. 21.
4. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res gestae*, xxxi/3. <www.thelatinlibrary.com/ammianus/31.shtml#3>. 3 May 2012.
5. Jordanes, *De origine actibusque Getarum*, chapter xxiv <www.thelatinlibrary.com/iordanes.html>. 3 May 2012.
6. See *The Poetic Edda: Vol I, The Heroic Poems*. Ed. Ursula Dronke. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969. 32.
7. Dronke 30–32.
8. On the *Eddica minora*, see Margaret Clunies Ross (Chapter 9, this volume).
9. Christopher Tolkien, "The Battle of the Goths and Huns." *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* 14 (1953–1957): 141–163 (141).
10. *The Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: Nelson, 1960, repr. London: HarperCollins, 2010. xxiii and note.
11. See Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*. Trans. Lewis Thorpe. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
12. For a detailed history of this, see Roberta Frank, "Siegfried and Arminius: Scenes from a Marriage." *Germania Remembered 1500–2009: Commemorating and Inventing a Germanic Past*. Ed. Christina Lee and Nicola McLelland. Tempe, AZ: AMRTS, forthcoming 2012.
13. As, for instance, in *Finnboga saga* ch. 19.
14. Tom Shippey, "Speech and the Unspoken in *Hamthismal*." *Prosody and Poetics: Essays in Honor of Constance Hieatt*. Ed. M.J. Toswell Toronto: U of Toronto Press, 1995. 180–96.

Acknowledgments

Four of the chapters in this volume have been published previously in different forms. Their original places of publication are cited below; all are reprinted with permission.

David Clark's chapter first appeared in *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga* by David Clark (2012) as [Chapter 2](#), pp. 46–66, “Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems.” Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

Edgar Haimmerl's chapter, translated by Antje Frotscher, was first published as “Sigurd—ein Held des Mittelalters. Eine textimmanente Interpretation der Jungsigurddichtung.” *alvíssmál* 2 (1993): 81–104.

Carolyne Larrington's chapter first appeared in a somewhat different form in *Quaestio Insularis: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic* 11 (2010): 1–20.

Tom Shippey's chapter is revised from *Tolkien Studies* 7 (2010): 291–324.

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Introduction

Revisiting the Poetic Edda

Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington

A little less than midway through the principal manuscript of Eddic poetry, the Codex Regius (Reykjavík, AM GKS 2365 4to), on f. 20r of 45 surviving folios, the scribe marks a major division. Halfway down the page, the poem *Alvíssmál* ends with the line “vppi ertv dvergr, vm dagaþr nv scínn sól i sali” [the day has dawned upon you, dwarf; now sun shines into the hall]. The mighty god Þórr has vanquished his underworld antagonist Alvíss, delaying him until dawn when the sun (we gather from other sources) turns him into stone, returning him to his proper element, for dwarfs live inside stones.¹ The realm of the gods fills with sunlight. It is a fine ending for the collected **mythological** poems of the Poetic Edda, for that is what is happening on this manuscript page (reproduced as our frontispiece).

The scribe skips a line and begins a new poem with an oversized red capital letter A, five lines tall (it is the only time the scribe skips a whole line, and the initials for other poems have been a maximum of three lines tall).² The first half-line of this poem, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, reads, “(Á)r var alda” [It was early in time]. It is a fine beginning for the collected **legendary-heroic** poems of the Poetic Edda, set in the olden times, much like the Old English heroic poem *Beowulf*, which begins “in geardagum,” in the days of yore (ON *ár* and OE *gear* are cognates). *Völuspá*, the first mythological poem of the Poetic Edda, back on the first page of the Codex Regius, also begins when “Ár var alda” (st. 3.1), but that was a time even before creation. The heroic time is ancient but within human memory and the heroic locale is our world, even if it has more supernatural elements and beings like norns and valkyries. The first lines of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* continue: “þat er arar gvlllo,/ hnigo heilog votn af

himinfiollom” [when eagles screamed and holy streams from Heaven’s crags fell]. The wild, craggy setting would have appealed to Tolkien, who painted one of his “great eagles” atop a snow-covered mountain at the top of the world.³

It was into this world that the hero Helgi was born, whom the norms or Nordic fates declare will be the best and most famous of kings (*fylki fræg-stan ok buðlunga beztan*). Neither word used to describe him as king is the ordinary one, *konungr*; rather, they are poetic words, for the best of kings deserves to have his name live on in heroic verse and so in memory. Thus it is said of Sigurðr, the greatest hero in the Poetic Edda and in Germanic legend as a whole, that “hans nafn mun aldri fyrnask í þýðverskri tungu ok á Norðurlöndum, meðan heimrinn stendr” [his name will never be forgotten in the German tongue and in the northern lands, for as long as the world stands] (*Völsunga saga* ch. 34).

Sigurðr is known as *Fáfnisbani*, slayer of the dragon Fáfnir, and so he is not only a great warrior and killer but specifically the killer of the greatest antagonist in Germanic legend, a dragon (see Acker, [Chapter 3](#), for the specific nature of Eddic dragons). Similarly, Helgi is named *Hundingsbani*, slayer of his great (human) antagonist, the rival king Hundigr, who “long had ruled over lands and thanes” (*HHI* st. 10). Helgi is not just a warrior but a leader of warriors; the word *fylkir* used to describe him means literally one who marshals the *fylki* or battle array (see La Farge 72). The first poem about Helgi is full of battles, with Óðinn’s hounds (wolves) running ravenous on the field and valkyries riding like lightning in the sky overhead, their chain-mail stained with blood (the name of another great valkyrie, Brynhildr, means “chain-mail-battle”) and flashes of light coming from their spears (*HHI* sts. 13 15). Helgi slays some sons of Hundigr, but another son, Lyngvi, survives for Sigurðr to fight him; Lyngvi had earlier killed Sigmundr, father of both Helgi and Sigurðr. There is a great battle; according to *Völsunga saga* (ch. 17), “Many a spear and many arrows could be seen hurtling through the air, the fierce sweep of the axe, cleft shields, gashed hauberks, helms slashed open, cleft skulls, and many a man was seen to fall to the ground” (tr. Finch 29). The Eddic poem *Reginsmál* (st. 26) tells us that Sigurðr carved the blood eagle in Lyngvi’s back and reddened the earth with blood, giving pleasure to that other devourer of corpses, the raven. Accordingly, Sigurðr, like Helgi, earns fame not just as a warrior but as a leader of warriors, “the most magnificent of war-kings” (*göfgastan herkonunga*; *Frá dauða Sinfjötla*, last line).

More can and will be said in these pages about the nature of Eddic heroes. Tom Shippey has already commented in the Foreword about these heroes placing a high value on self-control. Edgar Haimerl (Chapter 2) writes about the education of Sigurðr, in both strength and wisdom, which for Eddic heroes involves mythological and runic lore. David Clark (Chapter 1) writes how Helgi Hundingsbani maintains “homosocial bonds” by the distribution of wealth (much as Beowulf does) and how his warriors assert their heroic masculinity through the exchange of insults. Helgi Hjörvarðssonar’s men bond through competitive boasting; Helgi and his brother engage in sibling rivalry over a valkyrie bride (see also Larrington 2011).

Eddic heroines are equally if not more intriguing than their male counterparts. After the lacuna (see below), readers of the Codex Regius manuscript rejoin the story of Sigurðr at a crisis point. The heroic confidence and courage with which the heroes Helgi and Sigurðr faced their opponents and their interlocutors, the sunlight of Helgi’s youth, and his bold sea journeys over the tossing waves have dissipated into an uncertain world of intrigue and courtly deception (see Larrington 2012). Two powerful women, the former shield-maiden Brynhildr and Guðrún, the sister of the heroes Gunnarr and Högni, contend for the love of the dragon-slayer. Thwarted by magical potions of forgetfulness, Brynhildr loses the battle but encompasses the death of the man she loves and fulfills the oath she has sworn to hold Sigurðr in her arms or to die: “Hafa skal ec Sigurð—eða þó svelti! / mög frumungan, mér á armi” [I shall have Sigurðr—or I shall die—/ that young man I’ll have in my arms] (*Sgk* sts. 6/3–4). As Guðrún is choked by her inexpressible sorrow, Brynhildr’s cackling laughter resounds in the palace of the Gjúkungs. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir (Chapter 6) reads Brynhildr and the other women in the heroic poetry, in terms of speech act theory; she argues that women use words as weapons to achieve their aims; although some speech acts fail, others are extremely successful. While Guðrún’s frozen grief melts into tears and her formal lament for her dead husband releases her emotions, Brynhildr is giving orders for the construction of her funeral pyre, ordering hounds, hawks, and servants to be company for her on the road to Hel, where she will be united with Sigurðr. In these poems, the focus is on female feelings and women’s speech: rage, wild exultation, and profound sorrow occupy the poets’ imagination.

Sigurðr’s widow Guðrún metamorphoses from the traumatized and grieving woman discussed by Sävborg (Chapter 4) and Hill (Chapter 5) into a terrifying, even monstrous, wife and mother. In

Guðrúnarkviða II and III and *Oddrúnargrátr*, women's emotion subsides into quieter recollection of the many sorrows that these women have to face. Guðrún must make peace with her brothers and offer herself up once again in the "exchange of women" process; despite her prophetic misgivings, she is married off to Brynhildr's brother—for the Gjúkungs owe him a woman after letting his sister die (see Quinn 2009). Atli's court is a place of sorrow; moreover, Brynhildr's sister, the one whom Gunnarr should have married, utters, in solidarity with her dying friend, Borghildr, a *tregróf* [chain of woes], lamenting her tragic fate. Oddrún's brother Atli has foreclosed her bid to bring the strife between the two houses to an end.

Guðrún cannot save her brothers from Atli. When her husband breaks all his oaths and murders her brothers in the quest to gain the treasure Sigurðr won from Fáfnir, Guðrún sacrifices her children and feeds their flesh to her husband, making sure he knows the full horror of what he has done before she finally kills him. Carolynne Larrington (Chapter 7) focuses on the relationship between Guðrún and her children. Reading the Atli poems in terms of sacrificial practice and women's responses to their exchange between male groups, she argues that *Atlakviða* is informed by old ideas of sacrifice and ritual, while in the last two poems in the Codex Regius, *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*, Guðrún makes strategic choices between vengeance for Svanhildr, her daughter by Sigurðr, and survival with dishonor for her last pair of sons, born of her third marriage. As these brothers, Hamðir and Sörli, ride furiously off on a mission of revenge, which they regard as hopeless, their mother seems finally set to emulate Brynhildr, who invited her to join her on Sigurðr's funeral pyre so many years before, and she anticipates her passionate reunion with her first husband: "Beittu, Sigurðr, inn blacca mar, / hest in hraðføera, láttu hinig renna!" [Bridle, Sigurðr, the dark-coloured shining horse, / the swift-footed charger, let it gallop here!] (*Ghv* sts. 18/2–3). Sigurðr will be waiting for her as she finally ascends the blazing pyre and brings her tragedy to an end.

Women's mourning, and its concomitant action, vengeance, inform these final poems. The elegiac mode is foregrounded, its minor key only intermittently reverting to the bolder pace of the heroic: Gunnarr and Högni galloping in fury to Atli's court, or rowing so mightily across the fjord to his farm-stead that the rowlocks split. Hamðir and Sörli imitate their uncles in their rage-filled ride to avenge their sister, yet, fatally, they pause to strike down their half-brother whose riddling words challenge their sense of who is truly part of the family.

Brynhildr rages and laughs; even on the road to Hel, she vindicates the choices she has made when challenged by the *gýgr* “giantess”, who bars her way, while Guðrún moves from sobbing innocent to dry-eyed murderess, from prophetic pawn in the patriarchal game of exchange to steely actor on her own account.

The last heroines of the heroic world are, unexpectedly perhaps, the enslaved giantesses Fenja and Menja whose captor, the merciless Fróði, orders them to grind and grind at the magical mill-stone Grotti, grinding out gold and good fortune. But as Fróði’s intransigence is countered by the slow-building rage of the giant women Fenja and Menja, who fatefully grind out annihilation for him, the mill-stone shatters. Judy Quinn ([Chapter 8](#)) offers a new ecological reading of *Grottasöngur*, showing how the appropriation and misuse of a natural resource that belongs to the domain of the giants causes the downfall of a king. Women here have the final word, patrolling the ways in which human kings can behave.

*

Reading the Codex Regius is complicated by the eight-leaf gap at the center of our heroic poems. The final verses of *Sigrdrífumál* (*The Lay of Sigrdrífa*) were written into a gathering that subsequently became detached from the manuscript, most likely before it left Iceland for Denmark in the mid-seventeenth century, and the next gathering after the lacuna begins some way into a poem relating the fate of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the so-called *Brot* (Fragment of a Poem about Sigurðr). How the legendary dragon-killer got from his conversation with the valkyrie Sigrdrífa on the mountain top where she had been sleeping to the court of the sons of Gjúki, how he came to marry their sister, and what his involvement was in the wooing and winning of Brynhildr for his brother-in-law, Gunnarr, would be unknown to us were it not for the prose accounts of the intervening events given in summary in Snorri Sturluson’s *Skaldskaparmál* and in the fuller *Völsunga saga*. The saga is preserved in a single manuscript, MS NKS 1824 b 4to, a manuscript of 80 leaves written by an Icelandic scribe (perhaps in Norway) and dating to *ca.* 1400 (Olsen lvi–lviii). The saga explains how Sigurðr leaves the valkyrie-instructor (in the Edda, Sigrdrífa; in the saga, Brynhildr) and then re-encounters her at her foster-father’s home. There they become betrothed, and Brynhildr bears Sigurðr a son. When he visits the Gjúkung court, however, as foretold by the prophetic birds of *Fáfnismál*, Sigurðr is given a drink of forgetfulness

[*lóminnis veig*] by Grímhildr, the siblings' mother. He forgets Brynhildr and agrees to marry Guðrún, sister of Gunnarr and Högni. He also agrees to assist Gunnarr on a wooing journey to Brynhildr, who is in a fortress surrounded by fire and who has vowed only to marry that man who can cross the flame wall. Gunnarr's horse will not carry him across, so he exchanges appearances with Sigurðr, whose horse Grani takes him through the flames to Brynhildr. The couple sleep chastely together for three nights, a drawn sword between them. It is only at the double wedding feast that Sigurðr remembers his previous relationship with Brynhildr, but he resolves to let things be. Guðrún and Brynhildr quarrel over whose husband is superior, however, and Guðrún reveals the imposture. From then on, Brynhildr is bent on Sigurðr's destruction. The poems *Brot (Fragment)* and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma (Short Poem about Sigurðr)* give allusive and swift-moving accounts of what happens next; these vary from one another, as well as from the *Völsunga saga* version and the traditions preserved in other medieval texts, such as *Das Nibelungenlied* in Middle High German and the mid-thirteenth-century Norse *Þiðreks saga*.

*

Our first volume about the Poetic Edda (*The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*) appeared ten years ago. That collection combined classic chapters on the mythological poetry of the Edda with newly translated and newly commissioned chapters. This volume, dealing with the heroic Eddic poems and their legacy in medieval and post-medieval writing, offered an opportunity to commission a number of leading and upcoming scholars to write new chapters for the collection. One of the following chapters is a translated version of Edgar Haimenl's important study of the "Young Sigurðr" poems, while David Clark's chapter has been published in his recent collection of essays on Eddic poetry, gender, and revenge. The mythological poetry of the Edda was relatively easy to define, as consisting of the first 11 poems preserved in the Codex Regius manuscript of the Edda (GKS 2365 4to), with the addition of three other poems preserved in later medieval manuscripts—*Rígsþula* (List of Rig), *Baldrs Draumar* (Baldr's Dreams), and *Hyndluljóð* (Song of Hyndla)—and usually regarded by scholars as mythological in their scope. Heroic poetry is much less easy to define; while the remaining poems of the Codex Regius clearly belong to the tradition and form a whole episodic cycle, a large quantity of verse in Eddic meter has been preserved in other, usually

heroic, contexts. We have added *Grottasöngur* (The Song of Grotti), preserved in the Codex Regius manuscript of the *Snorra Edda* (GKS 2367 4to), to the poems considered in detail here, and we have invited a consideration of some of the other heroic Eddic poems (the so-called *Eddica minora*) in a separate chapter by Margaret Clunies Ross ([Chapter 9](#)).

The following chapters do not, as in our previous volume, treat each poem individually. There are twenty heroic poems in the Codex Regius (plus *Grottasöngur*), and many of them are closely linked in subject and theme, following an arc from the birth of Sigmundr's son Helgi to the death of the last of the Völsung dynasty and the vengeance for that death in *Hamðismál* (*The Poem of Hamðir*). The poems fall naturally into related groups: the two poems about Helgi, the slayer of Hundingr, and one poem about his namesake and near-double, Helgi Hjörvarðsson; the poems about the young Sigurðr, which are found before the lacuna; the poems that narrate the death of Sigurðr, Guðrún's laments for him, and the histories of Brynhildr's ride to Hel and of Oddrún, sister of Brynhildr and Atli. The concluding group of poems follows the later events of Guðrún's life in two poems about her marriage to Atli, and two final poems which recount the fate of her last remaining sons and her own resolution on suicide.

The final section of this book examines the medieval and post-medieval reception of the heroic poetry. Two chapters, by Margaret Clunies Ross ([Chapter 9](#)) and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe ([Chapter 10](#)), show how heroic Eddic themes survived and thrived outside the Codex Regius manuscript. Clunies Ross gives an overview of the so-called *Eddica minora*, showing the variation between different *fornaldarsögur* in terms of how they make use of the Eddic poetry they contain, whether the prose simply links substantial poems together, or whether poetry, as in *Völsunga saga*, is summarized but not quoted. Rowe finds that with the obvious exception of *Völsunga saga* and the references to its characters in *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, Eddic stories were not retold in *fornaldarsögur*; yet Eddic names and themes or motifs are frequently redeployed from the mid-thirteenth century onward.

Post-medieval treatments are explored in the final chapters of the collection. David Ashurst ([Chapter 11](#)) compares and contrasts the depiction of Sigurd/Siegfried by William Morris and Richard Wagner, showing the different conceptions of freedom that underpinned the interpretation of the hero. Finally, Tom Shippey ([Chapter 12](#)) puts into context and analyzes a poem composed by J. R. R. Tolkien,

published only recently: *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. Tolkien had a profound understanding of the effects and constraints of Eddic meters, and Shippey's readings throw a clear light on not only Tolkien's poetry but also the workings of the heroic poetry of the Edda.

Notes

1. See Acker. The implication here, though, is that Alviś is turned into stone and thus killed.
2. In this space, barely visible in the facsimiles, a lengthy title is written in red: "her hefr vp qveþi fra Helga hvndings bana. þeira oc h. volsvnga qviþa" [Here begins a poem about Helgi slayer of Hundingr and his men (and about) H(öðbroddr). Völsungs' Poem]. Usually when a new poem begins, the scribe writes the final words of one poem on the right and the first words of the next poem on the left, with a short title written in red between them.
3. Reproduced in Hammond 121. Eddic quotations are from Neckel & Kuhn.

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Introduction to Chapter 1

The Helgi Poems

*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and II; Helgakviða
Hjörvarðssonar*

*(Poem about Helgi Slayer of Hundingr I and II; Poem
about Helgi Son of Hjörvarðr)*

Critical History

The heroic poems of the Poetic Edda begin not with Sigurðr, Brynhildr, and Guðrún but rather with a far more obscure pair of heroes, both named Helgi. The first Helgi poem (*HHI*) does make him a son of Sigmundr and thus a half-brother of Sinfjötli and Sigurðr (sts. 6–8), but that is probably an attempt to bring this originally separate heroic cycle into the family of the Völsungs.¹ Helgi Hundingsbani and his men are otherwise called Ylfings (sts. 34, 49; *HHII* sts. 4, 8, 47), a tribe found in Sweden, and his world is thus separate from the continental setting of the Völsung poems.² The heroic legends of Helgi Hundingsbani and his predecessor, Helgi Hjörvarðsson, will serve as a prologue to the more unified and more internationally known legends to follow in the Codex Regius.

Like Sigurðr, both Helgis take up with valkyries with tragic consequences. The first Helgi is born, dressed in chain-mail from day one; the norns visit and predict his fate. He kills King Hundingr and then after some splendid battle poetry defeats four of Hundingr's sons. The valkyrie Sigrún descends from the sky to Helgi (in *HHII* she says she loved him before she had seen him), but he will have to defeat her suitor. After a flyting between opposing champions, Helgi does so, and Sigrún says he will enjoy her as well as lands and victory; *HHI* ends

here.³ *HHII* adds that they marry, but that Helgi had killed her father and one of her brothers. Years later her surviving brother Dagr kills Helgi with a spear lent him by Óðinn. Sigrún curses Dagr and then makes a bed beside Helgi in his burial mound, but he returns to Valhöll.

Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar is placed in the manuscript between *HHI* and *HHII*. After some initial difficulties, Hjörvarðr takes the beautiful Sigrlinn as his bride. She gives birth to a son. One day the son is sitting on a barrow and the valkyrie Sváva goes by, names him Helgi, and shows him where to find a fine sword. He uses it to kill Sigrlinn's former suitor, accompanied by his father's right-hand man, Atli. He and Helgi engage in a flyting with the giantess Hrímgērðr until the day dawns and she turns into stone. Later Helgi's brother Heðinn makes a drunken vow that he will marry Sváva. Helgi is mortally wounded in battle, asks Sváva to marry Heðinn, but she declines. A line at the end of the poem says that Helgi and Sváva are reborn; *HHII* specifies that they are reborn as Helgi Hundingsbani and Sigrún.

Scholarship on the Helgi poems from 1955 to 1984 is listed and discussed in Harris (1985). Encyclopedia articles on the poems are found in Strayer and in Pulsiano. The German-language *Kommentar* (von See 1997 –) devotes its entire fourth volume to the Helgi poems, with discussions of textual transmission, history of criticism, and line by line annotations. Joseph Harris (1983) describes, with fine attention to manuscript detail, the way *HHII* condenses and supplements *HHI*. Theodore Andersson gives a welcome study of *HHj*, calling it “the most neglected of all Eddic poems” (54). He provides a full summary and then relates the poem's motifs to those of Old Norse *fornaldarsögur*, especially those dealing with the Hrafnistumenn. The first half of the poem, dealing with Helgi's father Hjörvarðr, draws on bridal-quest motifs known from German-derived material like *Þiðreks saga*, such as may also have influenced “secondary Eddic lays” (69) like *Atlamál* and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*. John Stanley Martin shows how both Helgis, despite the fact that their name means “consecrated one,” are not “sacral kings,” semi-divine beings whose “powers sustain the fecundity of the natural environment.” Rather they are valued for their wisdom, munificence, and prowess as warriors. Carolyne Larrington discusses the Helgi poems in light of sibling relations, contrasting the early careers of Helgi Hundingsbani and his half-brother Sinfjötli and noting Helgi's death at the hands of his brother-in-law Dagr, which enrages Helgi's wife and Dagr's sister Sigrún. Helgi's mother Borghildr values her brother over her stepson Sinfjötli,

poisoning him for killing her brother. Regarding Helgi Hjörvarðsson, Larrington discusses his brother Heðinn's rivalry for the valkyrie bride Sváva. In the chapter that follows, David Clark examines the Helgi poems in the light of "homosocial desire"—of male bonding and competition among themselves and over heterosexual partners. Some aspects of the poem that previous commentators have found "bizarre and unnecessary" make more sense when viewed "in terms of its gender dynamic."

—Paul Acker

Notes

1. Helgi's narrative is integrated further with the Völsungs in that he kills Hundigr and four of his sons, but other sons of Hundigr kill Helgi's father Sigmundr (prose "Frá dauði Sinfjötli" [Concerning the death of Sinfjötli], which occurs just after *HHII*), and then Sigmundr's other son Sigurðr takes vengeance and kills these remaining sons of Hundigr (*Reginsmál*, prose after st. 25). See Larrington 174–175.
2. The prose introduction to *HHII* tries to have it both ways: "Sigmundr konungr oc hans ættmenn hétu Völsungar oc Ylfingar" [King Sigmundr and his kinsmen were known as Volsungs and Ylfings]. Saxo relates this Helgi to the King Helgi of the Danish *Skjöldungar* (see von See *Kommentar* 4.104–4.105) and thus to Hrothgar's brother Halga in *Beowulf*.
3. *HHI*, but not the other Helgi poems, is paraphrased in *Völsunga saga* ch. 9.

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1

Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems¹

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This chapter evaluates the usefulness of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of "homosocial desire" in understanding the construction of heroism in the Helgi poems of the Poetic Edda. Sedgwick inaugurates the use of this concept in pursuit of her hypothesis of "the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1985, 1). However, she observes that homosocial desire is often normalized by homophobic discourse—homosexuality is explicitly abjected or refused in order to validate homosocial bonds. Therefore, Sedgwick's concept is potentially helpful in illuminating the dynamic at work in three poems that seem to replicate this dynamic: *Helgakviða Hundingsbana in fyrri* (*The First Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani*), *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (*The Second Lay of Helgi Hjörvarðsson*), and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana önnor* (*The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbani*). These poems center on heroic adventure and martial exploits, where homosocial intimacy between warriors is predicated on the exclusion of same-sex eroticism seen most clearly in the exchange of sexual insults, or *níð*. Nevertheless, although Sedgwick has influenced work on premodern sexuality by several medieval and early modern scholars, her approach has not been accepted uncritically, and indeed it needs some modification in order to avoid anachronism in its application to medieval texts.

Drawing on research on cognate material by Preben Meulengracht Sørensen and my own work, this chapter begins to develop a critical approach to heroic homosociality that allows the texts to speak on their own terms and to interrogate modern categories and taxonomies

of sexuality. In particular, it replaces Sedgwick's emphasis (via Girard) on the triangulation of desire through a woman with a more nuanced approach to the erotics of interpersonal relations. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that the "incoherent" plot of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* makes more sense if we unpack the complexities of the poem's construction of Helgi's relations with friend, brother, and lover.²

Sedgwick and Homosocial Desire

The heroism in the Helgi poems is readily apparent. It may be less obvious, however, why the essay title employs and opposes the terms "homosociality" and "homophobia". In doing so, it explicitly draws on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the founders (along with Judith Butler and others) of the branch of gender/sexuality studies known as Queer Theory. Sedgwick inaugurates the use of the phrase "homosocial desire" at the start of her influential book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-social Desire*. The term "homosocial" had already become a standard term in sociological studies, and, in a discussion of Sedgwick's work, Stephen Jaeger describes the term with approval as one that:

sets sexuality to one side, eliminates its automatic inclusion, while holding it in readiness. The discourse of male-male love displays on its surface sexuality vanquished and banished. Sexual desire and sexual intercourse can infiltrate it secretly, but they do not govern it from their position of hiding. (15)

However, Sedgwick in fact employs the term in a collocation of her own coinage: "homosocial desire." This, as she remarks, appears to be something of an oxymoron—"homosocial" is a neologism formed by analogy with "homosexual," from which it is thus intended to be distinguished and is usually applied to so-called "male bonding" activities, which are frequently, in many Western societies, characterized by homophobia. Therefore, Sedgwick remarks:

To draw the "homosocial" back into the orbit of "desire, of the potentially erotic ... is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted. (1985, 1–2)

In our society, she explains, where there is a site of homosocial desire that society sanctions, one often finds that this desire is normalized

via homophobic discourse—homosexuality is explicitly abjected.³ Often cited in this context is the locker-room where manly men often make homophobic jokes to demonstrate that their physical and emotional intimacy with other men does not make them “gay.”⁴ Sedgwick clarifies that she does not want to suggest a “genetic” hypothesis—to claim that homosexual desire lies at the root of all forms of interaction between men. Instead, her term is “a strategy for making generalizations about, and marking historical differences in, the structure of men’s relations with other men, and she is using “desire” for its affective force, leaving open the question of how far that force can be considered to be sexual (1985, 1–2).

Sedgwick’s work has been extremely influential, whether receiving plaudits or criticism.⁵ The specific argument of *Between Men*, however, is that the homosocial relations in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature are cemented by the exchange of women (for instance, in marriage) and involve sublimated homoerotic desire. Her model is thus not immediately applicable to medieval literature, where women are often not involved in homosocial exchanges, and this chapter outlines some modifications that a reading of the Helgi poems suggests need to be made to make her theories more applicable to medieval literature. Nevertheless, her approach remains valuable in its decision not to prejudge the relations among friendship, sex, love, and desire in a specific historical context. It is clearly also of potential use in illuminating the dynamic at work in the Helgi poems, with their episodes of homosocial intimacy and prominent display of homophobic insults, a dynamic that reveals the constructed and fragile nature of heroic masculinity and the complex interaction of, and competition between, familial and other affective bonds.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana in Fyrri

Heroic homosociality is evident from the outset in the first Helgi lay, exemplified by the way the protagonist, from the moment he receives his name, is said in stanza 9 to “vaxa / fyr briósti” [grow in the bosom of his friends] as an “álmr ítrborinn / ynðis líóma” [noble-born elm, light of bliss]. He is clearly at the top of the hierarchy here, metaphorically as a tall tree and literally as the prince and future ruler of the land. He maintains these homosocial bonds by the distribution

of wealth: “hann galt ok gaf / gull verðungo” [he paid out and gave gold to his retinue], and we may compare here the gnomic passage at the start of *Beowulf*, where the young prince Beow behaves in similarly exemplary fashion, and we are told:

Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftum on fæder bearme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
leode gelæsten.⁶

[So shall a young man bring about good, with costly gifts from his father's breast, that in old age his dear retainers remain with him afterwards: that when war comes, they will serve their prince.]

Although treasure does not in fact ensure loyalty in *Beowulf* beyond the prologue (Beowulf's hand-picked warriors notably desert him in the dragon fight),⁸ in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, Helgi is followed by a large retinue of warriors into battle with the sons of Hundingr, and, as we shall see, his brother and second-in-command, Sinfjötli, represents him staunchly in the verbal battle with Guðmundr.

However, even at this early point, we have to register that this treasure is *blóðrekin* [bloodstained], and its continuing supply and thus the bonds of loyalty are predicated on martial dominance. It necessitates that Helgi kill his rivals—for instance, he kills Hundingr at the age of fifteen in stanza 10, presumably to gain the “löndum ok þegnom” [lands and men] over which we are told Hundingr “lengi réð” [ruled for a long time], and he accepts Sigrún's request to challenge her unwanted suitor Höðbroddr in stanzas 18 and 19. He must also resist calls for compensation and peace, as we see in stanza 12:

Létat buðlungr bótir uppi,
né niðia in heldr nefgjöld fá;
ván kvað hann mundo veðrs ins mikla
grára geira ok gremi Óðins.

[The Buðlungr did not allow compensation to be seen, nor the kinsmen any sooner to obtain kin-payment: he said they should expect the great storm of grey spears and Óðinn's wrath.]

The interaction here is curiously reminiscent of that in the Old English poem *The Battle of Maldon* in the exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger, where the latter threatens the Anglo-Saxon leader with *garræs* “a rush of spears” (l. 32) and Byrhtnoth promises to give

garas [spears] (l. 46) instead of tribute.⁷ In neither text is there any question of the hero giving up his treasure to avoid battle. Similarly, in stanza 13, we are told that

Fróða frið fiánda á milli,
fara Viðris grey valgiörn um ey.

[The peace of Fróði was torn between the foes; Óðinn's dogs roamed slaughter-eager throughout the island.]

Although the wolves here connote the bestial nature of battle to a modern audience, there is no doubt that Helgi is right to spurn peace and attempt to crush his foes. The final element of the heroic dynamic here is the imposition of an abjected sexual passivity onto one's opponents, which we see in the extended *flyting* between Helgi's brother Sinfjötli and Höðbroddr's brother Guðmundr.⁹

Much has been written about *flyting*, and the best of it is by Meulengracht Sørensen in his book *The Unmanly Man*. In this work, Meulengracht Sørensen details the sexual and gender dynamic found in both saga and Eddic literature, whereby male-male erotic activity is stigmatized, specifically sexual passivity. (He argues persuasively that the stigma was not generalized to all forms of same-sex activity until later in the medieval period under the influence of the Church's attempts to impose orthodoxy and reform.) Indeed, the worst insult one man can level at another in the Icelandic laws is to call him *sannsorðinn* or *ragr*—that is, to state that he has been penetrated by another man, an issue that still causes anxiety (and sometimes violence) today in men insecure in their own sexual identity. This kind of insult, known as *níð*, is considered to be so heinous that it justifies the recipient in killing his taunter, and the threat posed by *níð* is a key feature of sagas such as *Króka-Refs saga* and *Gísla saga Súrssonar*.¹⁰ Often, however, these insults form part of an extended and somewhat ritualized exchange, known as a *flyting*, defined by Carol Clover as

an exchange of verbal provocations between hostile speakers in a predictable setting. The boasts and insults are traditional, and their arrangement and rhetorical form is highly stylized. (445–446)

These *flytings* can be found in mythological poetry, as in *Lokasenna*, and heroic poetry alike. The insults all pertain to a man's masculinity and putative deviations from the sexual norm and can blend assertions of homosexual behavior with imputations of bestiality and transvestism. Often, as here in the first Helgi lay, one party will make

an opening claim that is then refuted by the other, who then makes a counter-claim, and the back-and-forth exchange tends to observe formal boundaries, with each claim occupying a separate strophe.¹¹

In *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, Sinfjötli starts the process by saying in stanza 34:

Segðu þat í aptan, er svínom gefr
ok tíkr yðrar teygir at solli.

[Say this evening, when you feed the pigs and entice your bitches with their slops.]

Sinfjötli is implying that Guðmundr, far from being nobly born, is in fact base, performing menial and degrading tasks that are ordinarily given to slaves. He follows this up by contrasting Helgi, whom he characterizes as supremely brave, who is *flugtrauðan* “averse to flight” and who “opt hefir / örna sadda” [has often given food to the eagles] (i.e., killed many warriors), while Guðmundr “á kvernom / kystir þýjar” [was kissing bondswomen at the querns]. This is a double insult in that, as well as the imputation of low rank or at least an undesirable affinity with those of low rank, it also contains the idea that Guðmundr spends a lot of time with women. While in Western culture today this might suggest a successful demonstration of heterosexual and hyper-masculine credentials, in the medieval period, a preference for female company (even when engaged in flirting with and kissing them), especially when preferred over martial activity in the company of other men, most often connotes effeminacy.¹²

Guðmundr comes back with the accusation that Sinfjötli has spent time as a werewolf and killed his own brother, violating both the species boundary and the most basic family bond. There is some truth to this, since in *Völsunga saga* ch. 8 Sinfjötli does in fact spend time living out in the forest like a wild animal and kills his half-brothers. Sinfjötli does not counter these charges but instead raises the stakes by embarking on a series of *níð* insults. He says:

“Þú vart völvá í Varinseyio,
skollvís kona, bartu skrök saman;
kvaztu engi mann eiga vilia,
segg brynjaðan, nema Sinfjötla!

Þú vart in skœða, skass, valkyria,
ötöl, ámátlig, at Alföður;
mundo einheriar allir beriaz,
svévís kona, um sakar þínar!

Nío átto vit á nesi Ságo
úlfa alna, ek var einn faðir þeira!” (sts. 37–39)

[You were a seeress in Varinsey, woman wise in deceit—you collected lies together: you declared you wanted to have no man, mailcoated warrior, except Sinfjötli!

You were the destructive witch, of the valkyries, terrible, fearsomely strong, of the Allfather—all the Einheriar were near fighting each other, self-willed woman, for your sake!

On Sága headland we two had begotten nine wolves—I alone was the father!]

Calling Guðmundr a “seeress” (st. 37) feminizes him twice over, since magic is frequently associated in Norse literature with effeminacy, and Helgi follows this up in the next strophe by calling him a “witch” and one of the “valkyries” (st. 38). The feminization is necessary to make a further element of the insult work, which is that he lusted after Sinfjötli. It might seem odd to impugn another man’s masculinity by implying that he desires the speaker himself. However, there is in medieval culture a fundamental distinction between what is often known as the “active” and “passive” dimension, though it is more accurately described as “insertive” and “receptive.”¹³ This becomes clear in st. 39, where Sinfjötli claims to have fathered nine wolves with Guðmundr, where the insult lies in the assertion of Sinfjötli’s dominance and Guðmundr’s passivity and femininity. Of course it goes without saying that this gender dynamic rests on a misogynistic view of femininity. The accusation that a man has born another man’s children is a subsection of *níð*, as, for example, in *Þorvalds þáttr víðförla*, when Þorvaldr kills two men who have composed an obscene poem about him and the bishop, implying that they have had sexual relations and the bishop has borne Þorvaldr’s children.¹⁴

Guðmundr refutes the charge of having been impregnated by Sinfjötli and counters it by asserting in stanza 40 that “þik geldo ... þursa meyar” [the ogre maidens ... gelded you], thus implying Sinfjötli was not only dominated by female figures but also literally emasculated (which would of course also render him incapable of fathering children). He then reiterates in the following strophe the accusation of fratricide and adds to it the imputation of slackness and indolence when he says, “Stiúpr ... Siggeirs, / látt und stöðom heima” [Siggeir’s stepson (Sinfjötli) lay under the grain stacks at home].¹⁵ Although an idle youth is a common feature of a hero’s biography, this is supposed to be followed by great deeds of heroism, rather than the *firinverkom* [wicked deeds] for which Guðmundr says Sinfjötli is *frægian* [infamous].

Guðmundr then raises the stakes still further by combining bestiality with effeminacy in his charge in stanza 42 that Sinfjötli was “brúðr Grana / á Brávell, / gullbitluð vart / gör til rásar” [Grani’s bride on Brávöllr, with a golden bit you were ready to go for a gallop]. It is one of the worst imaginable Norse insults to call a man a female animal, and, as a further intensification, Guðmundr asserts his own humanity and mastery when he says, “hafða ek þér móðri / mart skeið riðit” [I’ve ridden you weary over many a course], reversing the situation in stanza 9 where Sinfjötli claims dominance.¹⁶

Sinfjötli next achieves a double insult in stanza 43 in accusing Guðmundr again of performing menial tasks, saying he “Gullnis / geitr mólaðir” [milked Gullnir’s goats] and that he did this again as “Imðrs dóttir / töttrughypia” [Imðr’s daughter / in a tattered dress]. Although the stories behind these allusions are now obscure, and thus the full import of the insult is lost, it is clear that they combine the stigma of transvestism with that of low rank and poverty.¹⁷ The tag “vill þú tölo lengri?” [Do you want to keep talking?] is a challenge, asking Guðmundr whether he is ready to admit defeat, but Guðmundr responds with curses and murderous wishes.

This *flyting* is a verbal contest with gender implications, but it is in fact inconclusive. Helgi stops the dispute (and to some extent belittles the contribution of his second-in-command) when he declares that the time for exchanging “ónýtom orðom” [useless words] is over and the time for battle has come. However vicious the *flyting*, it would seem, the true test of heroic masculinity is in martial prowess, and Guðmundr is not only vanquished by words: Helgi proves himself the better man in the terms of the poem by his actions. We are told in stanza 53 that

ey var Helgi Hundings bani
fyrstr í fólki, þar er firar börðuz ...
alltrauðr flugar.

[Always was Helgi, Hundingsr’s bane, first in the host where men were fighting, wholly averse to flight.]

He is the ideal warrior-prince. The detail that he had “hart móðakarn” [a hard acorn of a heart, st. 53] is found elsewhere in Norse literature, for instance, in *Fóstbræðra saga* chs. 2 and 17 and the interplay among Gunnarr, Högni, and Hjalli in *Atlakviða* stanzas 23 and 25, where a small heart that is hard or firm is an index of a hero’s bravery.

The reward for Helgi’s successful meeting of these heroic requirements is seen in the final strophe of the poem where Sigrún

asserts that it is “fitting” [*samir ... vel*] that he should have both “rauðir baugar ok in ríkia mærl” [red-gold rings and the powerful girl], both “sigrs ok landa” [lands and victory] (st. 56). She is a semi-divine figure who can give herself, along with these other representations of power, to Helgi because of his demonstration of heroic masculinity signified by both verbal and physical dominance. This heroic masculinity is supported further by the preponderance of kennings in the lay (more than any other Eddic heroic poem), most of which are military.¹⁸ This gives it an affinity with skaldic verse and could be seen to tap into that medium’s interest in heroic rulership and kingship, expressed in terms of generosity with treasure, martial accomplishment, and the effective vanquishing of foes.

Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar

Even though it concerns an entirely different Helgi, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* contains similar elements to the two Helgi Hundingsbani lays. However, the winning of a woman is even more central, not least because the poem proper is preceded by a passage describing how Helgi’s father Hjörvarðr won Sigrlinn through the agency of Atli, the son of one of his earls. Since Helgi is the product of Hjörvarðr’s fourth marriage (all of which produce sons), he can be seen as the product of hypermasculine sexuality. We are told in the prose preceding stanza 6 that he is “mikinn ok vænn” [tall and handsome], but “var þöggull; ekki nafn festiz við hann” [was silent; no name had fastened itself to him], which may suggest the trope of the *kólbítr* or unpromising youth and the idea that a hero somehow has to earn his name. As the youth soon to be known as Helgi sits on a burial mound, he sees nine valkyries ride past, the chief of whom (later revealed to be Sváva) gives him his name and warns him that if he is always silent, then it will be a long time before he achieves dominance, figured (as in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*) as the possession of wealth (“hringom ráð” 6), martial prowess (in the kenning for warrior, “ríkr rógapaldr” [powerful apple-tree of strife]), and possession of land (*Röðulsvellir*). The warning implicitly urges him to embark on this heroic trajectory, and she also tells him of a pre-eminent sword he should seek out.

Like Helgi Hundingsbani, he pursues heroic masculinity by

vengeance and martial deeds, taking a troop of his father's men "hefna móðurföður síns" [to avenge his grandfather] (prose before st. 12) and using the sword Sváva directs him to kill his mother's former suitor Hróðmarr and achieve "mörg þrekvirki" [many valiant deeds], including killing the giant Hati, apparently without motivation. The hero's actions are thus to some extent predetermined, since from his youth he must engage with the consequences of decisions and actions taken before his birth. However, the pressure to achieve "valiant deeds" and gain a suitable bride leads to other actions that have further consequences. As in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* when the giant's daughter Hrímgæðr begins a *flyting*, it is his companion Atli who takes up the challenge. As we saw before, Atli had been Helgi's father's second-in-command, too, and wooed his wife for him, and this echoes the split we saw in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* between physical and verbal prowess, in some sense therefore making Atli Helgi's double.

Atli attacks Hrímgæðr as one of the *kveldriðor* [night-riding witches] (st. 15) and "hála nágráðug" [corpse-greedy trollwife] (st. 16), but since she is female, he cannot of course employ the full range of *níð* insults. In contrast, she has no such problem and, like Guðmundr, combines accusations of bestiality and effeminacy, saying in stanza 20:

Gneggia myndir þú, Atli, ef þú geldr ne værir:
brettir sinn Hrímgæðr hala! Aftarla hiarta
hygg ek at þitt, Atli, sé, þótt þú hafir hreina rödd!

[You would neigh, Atli, if you were not gelded: Hrímgæðr raises her tail! Further back, Atli, I think your heart must be, though you have a stallion's voice!]

The sexual dynamic here is complicated if, in raising her tail, Hrímgæðr is (in either her imagined equine form or in her own form, since it is conceivable that a troll might have a tail) signalling sexual availability. The essential idea then would be that she is effectively saying, "Even though I am sexually available, you are so gay that you can't do anything about it." That is, she is implying effeminacy, even though this could leave her open to the type of *níð* insult most often levelled at women: they are nymphomaniacs and they are interested in heterosexual sex to a degree that is shameful (Meulengracht Sørensen 18–19). Presumably the need to mock Atli's lack of masculinity outweighs the potential insult to which she is opening herself.¹⁹

Atli reverses the gender polarity, though, and asserts his dominance

over her—he is the *reini* “stallion” not the mare—threatening that his sexual prowess is such that she would be entirely lamed—“öllum muntu lemiáz” (st. 21)—if he really engaged seriously in their congress (“ef mér er alhugat”). Hríngerðr suggests that if she can sleep with Helgi “eina nótt” [for one night] (st. 24), this would be fitting compensation for the killing of her father, a proposal that is oddly flattering to her opponent but that Atli rejects on his behalf, and she recognizes that Helgi would rather have Sváva, whom she has seen reconnoitering the harbor and who she claims is the only thing preventing her from killing Helgi’s men (st. 26).

Atli wins the *flyting* by cunning rather than anything else by keeping the giantess talking until sunrise, at which point she is turned into stone. Carolyne Larrington in her introductory note to her translation of this poem says that this *flyting* “has no relevance to the plot” (123), and this is true. However, it is not irrelevant to the dynamic of the poem, since it enables the credentials of Helgi’s heroic masculinity to be set out. In both *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* and *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, homosocial bonds are directed at facilitating a male-female union—Sinfjötli and Atli both enable their companions to attain their valkyrie brides. However, the homosocial aspects of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* are more complicated because of the introduction of the tragic episode with Helgi’s brother Heðinn after Helgi and Sváva become betrothed, as we shall see.

It seems at first like a bizarre and unnecessary part of the plot. After Heðinn rejects a troll-woman’s advances, she vengefully curses him to vow to have Sváva, and he wanders off in sorrow. However, when he bumps into Helgi and tells his brother what has happened, Helgi seems not to be angry or perturbed but to resign himself to dying in a duel, content with the idea that his brother will take over his bride. In addition to this psychologically implausible scenario, we are also given the rather odd and unexplained information that the troll-woman was probably actually Helgi’s *fylgia*.

However, this section does make rather more sense viewed in terms of its gender dynamic. If the troll-woman is really Helgi’s *fylgia*, then Heðinn’s rejection of her invitation to have “fyllgð sína” [her company] may actually represent unacknowledged enmity toward his brother, later manifested in the oath to have Sváva over the pledging-cup. It is an interesting scene. We are told:

Um kveldit óro heitstrengingar; var fram leiddr sonargöltr; lögðo menn þar á hendr sínar ok strengþo menn þá heit at bragarfulli.

[During the evening oaths were made; a sacrificial boar was led forth; men laid their hands on it, and men made vows on the oath-cup.]

This is a ritualized scene of homosocial bonding—we are not told what the other men vow, but judging from other similar episodes in medieval literature, such as the well-known *beot* scenes in *Beowulf* and *Maldon*, we may imagine that they involve boasts of individual prowess: the ability to do certain things, achieve certain goals. Essentially, it is a site for competitive masculinity to display itself, and it is implicitly hostile: it involves saying, “I am better than you, I am a bigger man than you.” The boasts are sublimated forms of the basic male forms of competition—who can urinate highest up a wall, who has the biggest penis, who has dominance. Indeed, as a speech act, the boasting forms a counter-part to the *flyting*: the former involves the competitive comparison of positive attributes, the latter the competitive comparison of negative ones.

What is surprising here is not so much that this homosocial scenario leads to the potential disruption of homosocial bonds in fratricide, an act viewed with horror in medieval texts (as, for instance, in *Beowulf*’s claims about Unferth).²⁰ Heðinn clearly fears this but attempts to avoid it, since we are told he “iðraðiz svá miök at hann gekk á braut villistígo suðr á lönd” [repented this so greatly that he went away on wild paths to the south]. Rather, it is Helgi’s ready acceptance of the situation his brother has brought about and his recognition that destiny cannot be avoided: “Sönn muno verða / ölmál” [the ale-talk must come true] (st. 33). Not only does he tell his brother not to “reproach” himself (*Sakaz eigi þú*), he even thinks that it may be for the best if he does not return from his duel (“þá má at góðo / gøraz slíkt, ef skal” [it may turn out for good if that is what occurs], st. 33). Heðinn underlines his brother’s unusually accommodating nature by saying that, rather than forgive him, “þér er sømra / sverð at riðða” [it would be more seemly to redden your sword] (st. 34). However, Helgi prioritizes his homosocial bond with his brother over his love for Sváva, asking her not to weep (*gráttattu!*) but “at þú Heðni / hvílo gørvir / ok iöfur ungan / ástom leiðir” [that you prepare your bed for Heðinn / and love the young prince] (st. 41). She, however, seems less than keen to be passed between the brothers, implying that Heðinn is unworthy of her as a “iöfur ókunnan” [unknown prince] (st. 42), and the poem ends with Heðinn’s vow to avenge his brother (st. 43) and presumably thus to render himself worthy of Sváva.²¹ Larrington points out that the fatal duel Helgi faces is against Álfr, “the son of his

grandfather's killer, the son of his mother's thwarted suitor, and thus in a sense his brother *manqué*, the man who might have occupied the place he now has" (2011, 174). Therefore, one could read this duel as a displacement of the "real" sibling rivalry between Helgi and Heðinn, which neither of them is willing to contemplate: homosocial bonds are paramount, and the threat to them is eliminated by Helgi's sacrifice.

Helgakviða Hundingsbana Önnor

Despite the similarities of plot between the First and Second Helgi poems, the latter has a different tone and emphasis. Here, Helgi kills not only Sigrún's suitor and his kin but also Sigrún's father Högni and all of her kin except for her brother Dagr. Although he swears a truce and Helgi and Sigrún marry and have children, Dagr nevertheless later takes revenge for his father's death and slays Helgi. As Heinz Klingenberg comments, the *leitmotif* here is "revenge of kin. Kin-loyalty is opposed by individualistic love ... which itself is overtaken by ... kin-revenge" (281). The gender dynamic is correspondingly different, too. In another motif not present in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, we are told that Helgi goes in disguise to reconnoiter the court of King Hundingr before he kills him. When Hundingr sends men to search for him, Helgi has to disguise himself as a woman:

En Helgi mátti eigi forðaz annan veg en tók klæði ambáttar ok gekk at mala.

[But Helgi could not save himself any other way, but put on a serving-woman's clothes and went to grind [meal]]. (prose before st. 2)

However, a figure called Blindr "inn bölvísi" [the malevolent] seems to see through his disguise, saying,

Hvöss ero augo í Hagals þýio,
era þat karls ætt er á kvernom stendr;
steinar rifna, stökkur lúðr fyrir!

[Sharp are the eyes of Hagall's bondwoman; that is not one of lowborn lineage who stands at the millstone—the stones are tearing apart; the wooden stand is cracking!]

This episode is similar to the one in which Achilles tries to disguise himself as a girl but is unmasked when he is seen to be fascinated by the weaponry in the market rather than the silks and fabrics: the

moral being that one's true nature will win out.²² However, the emphasis in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* seems to be on the disparity in rank rather than in the cross-gendered aspect. Moreover, Helgi's friend Hagall covers for him by claiming that this is in fact Sigrún, and the reason the wooden stand is struggling under this miller's force is that she is a valkyrie, a fighter: that is why this person's eyes are *ötul* "terrible" (st. 4).

It is rank, too, that is at issue rather than gender in the later *flyting* between Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, when Sinfjötli says that Guðmundr will have "geitr um halda" [to herd goats] rather than fight (st. 22). It is true that the verbal interchange is much briefer in this poem, and it is possible as Carolyne Larrington suggests that the scribe "intended readers and reciters to leaf back to the first poem and read the *flyting* there" (1996, 132). However, no marks of abbreviation are found in the manuscript to indicate that this should occur, and I would argue that this is a deliberate choice to de-emphasize the gender aspects here and avoid sexual insults based on *níð*. A possible reason for this is that, although he is still pre-eminent in martial activity, in this poem, Helgi responds in love to the sexual initiative of Sigrún, the valkyrie who chooses him as her lover in defiance of her kinsmen. We are told in stanza 14 that she went to see the prince "Helga / hönd at sækia" [to seek Helgi's hand], and there is a repeated emphasis on her volition and agency. In stanza 15, she says she had already wholeheartedly loved Helgi before she had seen him, then later she says that, although she is betrothed to Höðbroddr, "iöfur annan / eiga vildak" [I wished to have another prince] (st. 16). We are told:

Nama Högna mæR of hug mæla;
hafa kvaz hón Helga hylli skyldo.

[Högni's maiden did not speak contrary to her thoughts; she said she intended to have Helgi's favor.]

There might even be a hint of initial reluctance on Helgi's part in the statement that "nú vill dyliaz / döglingr fyr mér, / en Högna mæR / [Helga] kennir" [now the prince wishes to hide himself from me, but Högni's maiden knows Helgi!] (st. 13).

The sense of her initiative here is so strong that for Helgi or his second to accuse another of sexual passivity might raise uncomfortable questions. The emphasis shifts in this poem from homosociality and its abjected opposite to the conflict between relations and to doomed male-female love. Nevertheless, at the end of

the poem, Helgi remains in the otherworld with his warriors, and Sigrún remains in the house with her maid until she too dies of grief.

The emphasis at the end of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* and the start of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* that Helgi and Sváva were reincarnated as Helgi Hundingsbani and the idea at the end of *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* that Helgi and Sigrún were reincarnated as Helgi Haddingia-damager and Kára Hálfðansdóttir, another valkyrie, even though this is disavowed as *kerlingavilla* [an old wives' tale] perhaps reflects the sense that heroic masculinity involves a trauma endlessly repeated in the hope of it working out right this time: the hero defeats his rival for a bride but sparks a turn of events that in turn leads to the hero's demise. Certainly it would seem that heroic masculinity in these poems is a fragile thing. It is predicated on the support of other men achieved by the maintenance of homosocial bonds, but also the displacement of homosocial desire onto the enemy who is feminized and then destroyed. Desire is validated when its object is a woman, but this can have fatal aspects.

I have tried to demonstrate the utility of Sedgwick's concept of homosocial desire. However, as mentioned earlier, in her work this is triangulated by a woman. This occurs in one of two ways. First, it can occur in a positive sense, where two men are brought into an alliance by the exchange of a woman in marriage, usually as father-in-law and son-in-law. Second, however, and negatively, it can occur where two rivals are joined in competition for the love or possession of the same woman.

This dynamic can be seen to some extent in the Helgi poems, but it has to be modified significantly. For instance, in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, one could loosely see Helgi and Höðbroddr as joined in their rivalry over Sigrún, but the site of the greatest antagonism and that most clearly fits Sedgwick's dynamic of abjected homosexuality is the *flyting*. However, the verbal contest is not between the rivals themselves but between the men's companions and representatives, Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, which complicates the binary relationship envisaged by Sedgwick. The same scenario holds for *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, but in this poem, we have a further triangle, where Helgi and Dagr are, in a sense, rivals for Sigrún. However, this bond of enmity is motivated by Dagr's wish to avenge his father and re-appropriate his sister, and thus the sexual bond is replaced by the sibling bond for one of the parties.

Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar is even more complicated. There is an instance of Sedgwick's positive triangle, in Helgi's relationship with

Sváva's father, Eylimi, but this bond is largely peripheral to the poem and covered in a single sentence ("Hann kom til Eylima konungs ok bað Svávo dóttur hans" [He came to King Eylimi and asked for his daughter, Sváva]). Again, in terms of the negative triangle, in a sense Helgi's father Hjörvarðr is joined in enmity to Sigrlinn's father Sváfnir, who refuses their alliance. However, it is Atli who does the wooing and who later kills Sváfnir. It is Atli, too, who carries out the *flyting* with Hrímgērðr, both protecting his prince from the giantess's desire and also clearing the way for Helgi to get to Sváva. Finally, the best example of Sedgwick's type of triangulation is in Heðinn's rivalry with his brother for the love of Sváva. However, not only is there a sibling connection here, an aspect that does not really feature in Sedgwick's account, but the rivalry is turned by Helgi into a positive homosocial bond in his acquiescence to his fate and desire for his brother to take over his bride.

It is thus clearly not possible to take over Sedgwick's taxonomy of homo-social desire wholesale in analyzing medieval texts, and the Helgi poems delineate a much more complex set of overlapping and competing bonds, indicating that a more nuanced consideration is necessary of how the roles of lover, rival, friend, and sibling can interact. It suggests, too, that the modern emphasis on the desire for the sexual object choice, which Sedgwick argues structures much of modern thought and culture in the West, is still less accurate and apposite than even she suggests.²³ Desire in medieval texts is involved in and inflected by these other relations in a way that does not come to the fore in the texts that Sedgwick analyzes. A more nuanced typology seems desirable, and it is hoped that the analysis in this chapter may serve as a tentative move toward a recognition of the fluidity of relationships of desire—a recognition largely accepted in practice but that we seem curiously unable to formulate discursively.

Notes

1. This chapter originally appeared as "Heroic Homosociality and Homophobia in the Helgi Poems," in David Clark. *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012. 46–66. Reprinted with minimal alterations and with permission.
2. On the incoherence of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*'s plot, see Larrington 123.
3. "Abjection" (literally, the state of being thrown away or cast off) is a term

- employed in critical theory to denote individuals, groups (people with disabilities, the LGBT community, people of color), or objects (corpses, feces, rotting matter) that may be associated with degradation, baseness, and/or disgust by those belonging to the dominant social group. See initially Kristeva.
4. This applies more to professional than amateur sports, particularly to football. See, for instance, Cascarino and, more recently, Brocklebank. Eric Anderson argues persuasively that this kind of “homohysteria” is fast disappearing in university-educated men (7).
 5. See initially the contributions to *Regarding Sedgwick*, ed. Barber and Clark. For a critical review, see G. S. Rousseau in *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, ed. Gerard and Hekma 515–529.
 6. *Beowulf* 20–24a, cited Klaeber, ed.
 7. On this aspect of *Beowulf*, see Clark 2006.
 8. Cited from *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Dobbie 6: 7–8.
 9. It is interesting that both rivals are represented in the verbal contest by their close associates, and this split is seen in a variety of medieval contexts where the skills of physical prowess and verbal dexterity are shared between two closely connected men. It seems clear that the former is privileged over the latter, and it is the less highly ranked individual who carries out the verbal contest. We might compare the similar split when the god Freyr’s servant Skírnir woos Gerðr on his lord’s behalf. (See further comments below.)
 10. Meulengracht Sørensen, chs. 3 and 4. For a more detailed description of *níð* and the sexual and gender dynamic of *Gísla saga*, see [Chapter 4](#) of my *Gender, Violence, and the Past in Edda and Saga*.
 11. For a detailed list of the formal and generic characteristics and common components of *flytings*, see Clover; see also Bax and Padmos.
 12. See, for instance, Karras 129; Keiser 141–151.
 13. See Karras 4, Murray 5, and the discussion in [Chapter 4](#) of my *Gender, Violence, and the Past*.
 14. See Meulengracht Sørensen, *Unmanly Man*, 54–55; Martínez Pizarro; and [Chapter 5](#) of my *Gender, Violence, and the Past*.
 15. Taking *stöðom* as a form of *staði* [stack of grain or haystack]; cf. La Farge and Tucker, s.v.
 16. There may be an obscene pun on *skeið* here. It appears in Fritzner as a “scabbard” word, with obvious resonances picked up in the fact that the Modern Danish word *skede* is a vulgar term for “vagina.” My thanks to Carolyne Larrington for alerting me to this.
 17. It is, of course, possible that the stories never existed. Accusations in *flytings* often have no factual basis, as with Loki’s untrue accusations in *Lokasenna* and the Beowulf-Unferth interchange in *Beowulf*, where Beowulf corrects Unferth’s version of events. More generally, allusions could easily be created to give an impression of a rich background.
 18. For instance, *varga vinr* “friend of wolves = warrior” (st. 6), *blóðorm* “serpent of

blood = sword” (st. 8), and *benlogum* “wound-flames = swords” (st. 51). See von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, 4: 144.

19. It is also possible that, since Hrímgærðr is a troll-wife, there is no need for her to abide by the normal social rules.
20. When Unferth questions Beowulf’s bravery, the latter claims that Unferth became his brothers’ slayer: “þinum broðrum to banan wurde” (l. 587). He will be punished for it in hell (ll. 588–589).
21. Women are often passed between male relatives when one of them dies, and the poet’s acknowledgment of Sváva’s reluctance shows an unusual recognition that women’s desire for men is not interchangeable.
22. See, for instance, Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 13.162–13.180.
23. Sedgwick’s later comments go further in recognizing the complexity of intimate bonds. See, for example, *Epistemology of the Closet* 8.

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Introduction to Chapters 2 and 3

Young Sigurðr

Grípisspá, Reginsmál, Fáfnismál, Sigrdrífumál

Critical History

The material in the Poetic Edda concerning the youth of Sigurðr consists of a number of poems, some with overlapping content, but also a number of connecting prose passages, to the extent that many scholars speak of an underlying (lost) **“Sigurðar saga.”* The material begins after the Helgi poems with a prose piece called *Frá dauða Sinfjötla* (*Concerning the Death of Sinfjötli*), followed by (to use the customary editorial titles, which are not found in the manuscript): *Grípisspá* (*Grípir’s Prophecy*), *Reginsmál* and *Fáfnismál* (*The Lay of Regin*) and (*The Lay of Fáfnir*)—both of these poems have much prose interspersed), and the fragmentary *Sigrdrífumál* (*The Lay of Sigrdrífa*). This last poem breaks off because of a missing portion of the manuscript usually called “the great lacuna.” Indeed, this lacuna may in part contribute to the impression that this “Young Sigurðr” group forms a single unit, although in the following essay, Edgar Haimenl argues for a narrative and thematic coherence, beginning after *Grípisspá*. T. M. Andersson discussed the young Sigurðr material in light of its hypothetical sources as proposed by German scholars in particular; for him, the material divides into six episodes:

- 1) The story of Sigurðr’s father Sigmund;
- 2) The circumstances of his birth and fostering;
- 3) His interview with his uncle Grípir;
- 4) His vengeance for his father;
- 5) His slaying of the dragon;
- 6) His interview with the warrior maiden Sigrdrífa.

Episodes one and two are not found in the Poetic Edda but rather in the prose *Völsunga saga*, which supplements the Eddic material with other sources. The ‘interview’ with Grípir is mainly a poetic prophecy (*spá*). The account of Sigurðr’s slaying of the dragon occurs, somewhat disappointingly, in a brief prose passage, paralled in Snorri’s *Edda* (ch. 40) and in *Völsunga saga* (ch. 18). The poem *Fáfnismál* then records the dialogue between hero and dying dragon (who speaks, unlike any other Germanic dragon, but rather like Smaug in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*). Episode six, the ‘interview’ with Sigdrífa, a valkyrie (in fact, Brynhild, or a version of her), is mainly a wisdom monologue, conveying information about runes and heroic behavior. Because the poem is cut off by the “great lacuna” (the physical loss of probably one codicological gathering), the valkyrie stops in the sixth of eleven announced maxims; the remainder of *Sigrdrífumál* is supplied from later manuscripts.

The poems are annotated in volume five of the *Kommentar* (von See, 2006), where one can find (among much else) the latest opinion on details such as whether the birds (*igður*) who talk to Sigurðr in *Fáfnismál* are nuthatches or some other species (more likely the *Sumpfmelise* or marsh tit). Criticism through 1985 (especially after 1955) is surveyed in English by Joseph Harris, who notes for instance that this Young Sigurðr group is distinguishable paleographically from the Helgi poems before it and is thought “to have been set down in writing fairly early” (75), based on a “Sigurðar saga” that was in writing “at least by 1200” (75–76). *Grípisspá* is usually thought to have been composed last of this group, as a kind of proleptic summary.

Among the articles cited by Joseph Harris, English language readers may be particularly interested in Richard Harris’s article on *Grípisspá*, in which he discusses the poem in relation to other Eddic prophecies, and suggests its function is not to foretell the future (within an overall narrative) but rather to make a summary for the benefit and entertainment of an audience. Richard Harris then discusses particular plot elements in relation to other accounts of the Sigurðr material.

For English language articles since 1985, one can consult entries under the various poems in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (ed. Pulsiano), as well as the articles by Gade and Quinn, cited below by Haimenrl. Gade explains Sigurðr’s riddling name for himself in st. 2, “*göfuct dýr*” ‘splendid animal’ as a pun on the alternate form of his name Sig-røðr ‘victory-boar’, hence Hildi-svíni, ‘battle-pig’, also the name of the ‘splendid animal’ (a golden-bristled boar) owned by

Freyja, according to the poem *Hyndluljóð*, st. 7. Quinn discusses how in *Reginismál*, “the rhythm changes from *fornyrðislag* to *ljóðahátt* ... as the discursive mode changes from narrative (here carried forward by dialogue) to a kind of catechism” (109). In *Sigrdrífumál*, “the incantatory rhythm of *ljóðahátt* gives way to a long-line verseform for the dense catalogue of prescriptions” (113). As Haimperl acknowledges, Quinn closely follows the text as it is written down in the Codex Regius, noting how *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are not thus designated and are separated only by a prose paragraph with no rubric. The prose links “bring to the surface of the text the underlying narrative of the verse” (119).

Carolyn Larrington’s 1993 study of Old English and Old Norse wisdom poetry contains a chapter devoted to “Sigurðr’s Youth.” While giving a full reading of the poems, she highlights Sigurðr’s acquisition of different kinds of wisdom from different mentors: omens and battle advice from Óðinn in *Reginismál*; mythological lore (in one short section) from Fáfnir in *Fáfnismál*; and runic lore and social wisdom from the valkyrie Sigrdrífa in *Sigrdrífumál*. Terry Gunnell hypothesizes that *Fáfnismál* (or rather, those portions of it in *ljóðahátt*) would have been read aloud by at least two performers; the material described in prose would have been performed as mime. Elizabeth Jackson compares the subsections of *Hávamál* with *Sigrdrífumál* and notes that the latter “comprises three separate lists, one admonitory (corresponding to the conventional *Loddfáfnismál*), one concerned with the origin of runes (corresponding to *Rúnatal*) and one a catalogue of runes and their uses (corresponding to *Ljóðatal*)” (42–3). Most recently, Jens Peter Schjødt devotes a section of his 2008 monograph to assessing the matter of young Sigurðr, both in the Poetic Edda and in *Völsunga saga*, as an initiation ritual or rite of passage. Schjødt’s main focus is on myth, but he finds this heroic legend to be “a reflection of how a young untried man becomes qualified to be a prince” (298).

In the articles printed here, first Antje Frotscher translates from the German a study by Edgar Haimperl. Like Quinn, Haimperl pays close attention to the way the manuscript divides the young Sigurðr material, and he formulates a narrative outline based on those divisions. Haimperl sees an overriding concern with a hero’s attainment of wisdom and strength (a medieval topos), but he also gives a very close reading of the ways in which Sigurðr “makes progress toward this state of perfection.”

In the article following Haimperl’s, Acker focuses on *Fáfnismál* and

more particularly the physical image of dragons that its introductory prose incorporates. Between the Eddic account and its paraphrase in *Völsunga saga*, Acker sees a shift in conception of dragons from monstrously large snakes to winged, composite creatures. He traces a similar development in Scandinavian pictorial art.

—Paul Acker

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Sigurðr, a Medieval Hero

A Manuscript-Based Interpretation of the “Young Sigurðr Poems”

Edgar Haimperl

Translated by Antje Frotscher

The reader of the Edda in its original manuscript form encounters the “Young Sigurðr Poems” (*Jungsigurddichtung*) not in a sequence of individual lays but rather as a single unit:¹ the Codex Regius does not supply titles for the lays but only some phrases perhaps intended to guide a performer or reader.² *Sigrdrífumál* is not even visually separated from *Fáfnismál* by a large initial— *Fáfnismál* merges directly into *Sigrdrífumál* via some connecting prose.³ Nor does the narrative provide any unequivocal criteria according to which the poetry of Sigurðr’s youth might be divided into individual lays.

There is a general consensus that the version of Sigurðr’s youth transmitted in the Codex Regius dates from the thirteenth century: “Around 1230—i.e. *after* Snorri’s handbook for skalds—an Icelander combined a number of lays which together formed the story of Sigurðr’s life” (Heusler 1943, 49).⁴ While it is regrettable that older lays may have been lost in the process, the manuscript’s radical re-ordering offers insights into the aesthetic principles and authorial intention of the thirteenth century.

The present chapter restricts itself to the question of the representation of a thirteenth-century heroic image in the Eddic poetry of Sigurðr’s youth and will show that in the form transmitted in the Codex Regius, this poetic material presents the education of Sigurðr as a hero in accordance with medieval ideals, able to combine

fortitudo with *sapientia*. This medieval heroic ideal is based on Isidore's definition: "Nam heroes appellantur viri quasi aërii et caelo digni propter sapientiam et fortitudinem" [For "heroes" are called (those) men who because of their wisdom and their courage are worthy of Heaven] (Lindsay 1.39.9).⁵ The poems employ stanzas in which the different speakers out-do each other in instructive speech and wisdom and thereby convey a sense of Sigurðr's evolution into an ideal hero for a thirteenth-century audience.

First I will examine the structure of the Eddic poetry of Sigurðr's youth, which can be broken down into subdivisions according to criteria of both form and content. The basis for these subdivisions will always be the form of the material as it is transmitted in the Codex Regius.⁶ Neither headings inserted nor changes made in later versions, nor any theories about possible earlier oral versions, will be considered relevant to an interpretation that strives to demonstrate thirteenth-century authorial intention.

The Eddic poetry of Sigurðr's youth forms a coherent whole in both its structure and content. It can be subdivided into several smaller sections, each introduced with a piece of prose delineating the plot, and then continued in verse dialogues. Analysis by change of interlocutors produces the same section divisions.

(1) Education by Reginn (*Rm* Pr–12pr)

Prose: Sigurðr acquires Grani and meets Reginn for the first time (*Rm* Pr1–6).

Verse (with interspersed prose): Reginn teaches Sigurðr (*Rm* Pr6– *Rm* 12pr); in a retrospective monologue he tells him about his ancestors.

(2) Preparation for Sigurðr's youthful exploits (*Rm* 12pr1–25)

Prose: Reginn welcomes Sigurðr (*Rm* 12pr1–14pr3). Forging of the sword (*Rm* 14pr4–7), incitement against Fáfnir (*Rm* 14pr8–9) and preparations for the fight against Hunding's sons (*Rm* 15pr).

Verse: Hnikarr gives advice, and enumerates good and bad battle-omens (*Rm* 16–*Rm* 25).

(3) Sigurðr's youthful exploits (*Rm* 25pr–*Fm* 22)

Prose: The killing of Hunding's sons (*Rm* 25pr–26) and

Sigurðr's fight against Fáfnir (*Fm* Pr).
Verse: Sigurðr's dialogue with Fáfnir (*Fm* 1–22).

(4) Quarrel with Reginn (*Fm* 22Pr–31)

Prose: Reginn emerges from his hiding-place (*Fm* 22pr).
Verse: Verbal duel with Reginn (*Fm* 23–31): Sigurðr rejects Reginn's praise. Short prose section recounting the cutting out of Fáfnir's heart (*Fm* 26pr) is followed by a discussion of *hugr*.

(5) Instruction by nuthatches (*Fm* 31pr–44)

Prose: Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir's heart. Its blood allows him to understand the language of the birds (*Fm* 31pr).
Verse: The nuthatches advise Sigurðr to kill Reginn (*Fm* 32–38) and to take the treasure. They promise him a bride and tell of Sigdrífa (*Fm* 40–44).

(6) Instruction by Sigdrífa (*Fm* 44pr–lacuna)

Prose: Sigurðr follows the advice of the nuthatches and goes to see Sigdrífa (*Fm* 44pr–*Sd* 2pr).
Verse: The instructions of Sigdrífa (*Sd* 3–lacuna).

Education by Reginn (*Rm* pr–12pr)

The prose introduces this section as Reginn's instructions to Sigurðr: "Reginn veitti Sigurði fóstr oc kenzlo" [Reginn offered to foster Sigurðr and taught him] (*Rm* Pr5). The introductory words "hann sagði Sigurði frá forellri síno" [he told Sigurðr about his ancestors] (*Rm* 12pr) and the concluding remark "Þessa hluti sagði Reginn Sigurði" [These things Reginn told Sigurðr] (*Rm* 12pr) bracket this section as a formal unit. Reginn, possibly a maternal great-uncle,⁷ tells Sigurðr of his ancestors. The remark that Reginn loved Sigurðr dearly ("ok elsaði hann miöc" [*Rm* Pr5]) emphasizes Reginn's role as educator.⁸ Reginn's retrospective narrative is a monologue: he recounts the history of the hoard and informs Sigurðr how the curse has already been partially fulfilled.

Narrative events here are without exception governed by avarice.

Characterized by an insatiable greed for treasure, Loki demands the ring even after Andvari has already paid his ransom (*Rm* 4pr). Nor is Odin free of greed. Having put the ring Andvaranaut on his finger (*Rm* 5pr4), he has to take it off again at Hreiðmarr's demand.⁹ Like the gods, so too the heroes are governed by greed: Hreiðmarr values possession of the hoard more highly than a long life; neither does he care about curse or threats ("hót þín hroeðomc ecci lyf" *Rm* 9). Driven by greed, Fáfnir murders his own father. Hreiðmarr seems to identify his son's motivation: "Mart er, þat er þörf þíar" [Needs makes men do many things] (*Rm* 10). The fact that their actions are solely motivated by greed makes these heroes seem more questionable.

For a thirteenth-century audience, the questionable protagonists act against their own better judgment. Again and again the poetic material alludes to the curse (*Rm* 5, 6, 8), making abundantly clear that every owner of the hoard is aware of the consequences the possession of the gold will have for himself and his descendants. Nevertheless, they all allow themselves to be dazzled by the gold. Rather than deciding to avert the impending disaster, Hreiðmarr chooses the hoard: "Rauðo gulli hugg ec mic ráða muno, svá lengi sem ec lifi; hót þín hroeðomc ecci lyf" [I think that I will own the red gold as long as I live; your threat does not trouble me one bit] (*Rm* 9). Hreiðmarr's son Fáfnir is as obstinate as his father; he certainly knows about the curse, yet he does not hesitate to murder his father.

In his monologue, Reginn contrasts the wrongful actions of his relatives with the exemplary Lyngheiðr, Hreiðmarr's daughter. She rejects fratricide as a means of avenging her father (*Rm* 10) and admonishes Reginn not to take action against his brother with a sword.

Bróður qveðia scaltu blíðliga
arfs oc œðra hugar;
era þat hoeft at þú hiörvi scylir
qveðia Fáfni fiär.

(*Rm* 12)

[You shall graciously and with a friendly disposition ask your brother for the inheritance. It is not fitting that you ask Fáfnir for the gold with a sword.]

On a personal level, these final words of Reginn's monologue are an instructive aphorism aimed at the young Sigurðr; at the same time, they summarize the didactic content of the monologue for the audience: the contrast between exemplary ("scaltu") and inappropriate ("era þat hoeft") behavior corresponds to the contrast

between the gods' and heroes' misconduct (*Rm* Pr6–10) and Lyngheiðr's model behavior (*Rm* 10–12).

A comparison with *Völsunga saga* indicates that the didactic tendencies of Reginn's lessons may be the personal contribution of the redactor of the Eddic material of Sigurðr's youth. Even though *Völsunga saga* ch. 4 corresponds directly to *Reginsmál* Pr15 to *Reginsmál* 6, the saga omits *Reginsmál* 3–4, Loki's request for information and Andvari's answer about conditions in hell.¹⁰ From *Reginsmál* 7 on, *Völsunga saga* abbreviates, demonstrating a different authorial intention from that of *Reginsmál*. Both the exemplary figure of Lyngheiðr and the final aphorism (*Rm* 12) are omitted in *Völsunga saga*. Rather than emphasizing didacticism, *Völsunga saga* foregrounds realistic representation—here the motivation for Reginn's monologue is the incitement of Sigurðr,¹¹ and thus Reginn leaves out Lyngheiðr's admonishment.

Preparation for Sigurðr's Youthful Exploits (*Rm* 12pr–25)

A change of scene marks a break between Reginn's retrospection and the resumption of the narrative. Reginn's teaching and the account of his relatives took place at the court of King Hjálprekr ("Þá var kominn Reginn til Hiálprec's" *Rm* Pr3); now the scene changes to Reginn's home ("Einn dag, er hann [= Sigurðr] kom til húsa Regins" *Rm* 12pr; "til sala várra" *Rm* 13).¹² For Sigurðr this change of scene is also the entry into a new phase of life. He spent his childhood with Hjálprekr ("Óx Sigurðr þar up í barnæsko" *DSf* 31–32)—his adolescence is spent with Reginn ("Sigurðr var þá iafnan með Regin" *Rm* 14pr).

This turning point in Sigurðr's life is emphasized when Reginn, who has known Sigurðr since he was a child, refers in his welcoming words to Sigurðr's youthful exploits.¹³ Moreover, Reginn repeatedly mentions Sigurðr's change of location ("kominn er hingat," *Rm* 13; "með oss kominn" *Rm* 14). I cannot see any reason to change the sequence of these stanzas (*Rm* 13, 14),¹⁴ which here mark the threshold between Sigurðr's childhood and his adolescence.

In *Reginsmál*, Reginn's welcoming words also paint a picture of the young Sigurðr: Reginn extols the noble lineage of his foster son and highlights his courage (*móðr* *Rm* 13.5), his daring in battle (*fólcðiarfr*

gramr *Rm* 14.2), and his martial disposition (Sigurðr raises expectations of battle, *Rm* 13.7–8, 14.7–8). The following prose section continues to paint this image of the brave hero: after testing his sword,¹⁵ Sigurðr splits Reginn’s anvil with it, though no motive for this deed is supplied. Heusler asks “whether the unique, anvil-splitting blow was performed with the sword, a test of the weapon—or performed with a hammer as a sign of excessive strength and unsuitability for trade.”¹⁶ Even executed with a sword, this splitting of the anvil is not only a mark of the sword’s quality but also an expression of the inordinate strength of the young hero. Already before he begins his youthful exploits, Reginn’s welcoming words and the splitting of the anvil mark Sigurðr’s daring in battle and emerging physical strength.

Sigurðr’s *fortitudo*-oriented heroism becomes even more obvious in the reasoning with which he rejects Reginn’s incitement to kill Fáfnir (*Rm* 15). Only loss of personal honor and fear of being ridiculed are given as the reason for vengeance and its priority over the acquisition of the hoard.¹⁷ Intent on providing proof of his valor, Sigurðr does not even consider the possibility of reconciliation.

Sigurðr’s first youthful exploit, the battle against the sons of Hunding, is reduced to a short prose statement in *Reginsmál* (“Sigurði átti orrosto micla” *Rm* 25pr). The journey to battle and Odin’s company on the way became the frame narrative for an extensive didactic dialogue.¹⁸ After Reginn’s preliminary words, Sigurðr begins the actual dialogue by asking Odin/Hnikarr about omens that portend victory—“heill at sverða svipon” (*Rm* 19). He models the question closely on Loki’s question to Andvari, in the form Reginn reported it,¹⁹ and thus for the first time proves his willingness to learn. Odin answers by listing good omens (“heill at sverða svipon” *Rm* 20): victory is foretold by the company of the raven (*Rm* 20), the meeting with men eager for glory (*Rm* 21), and the howling of the wolf (*Rm* 22). In this tripartite answer, stanzas 19–22 comply exactly with the expectations of wisdom poetry: a formulaic question is followed by answers whose unity is shown through consecutive numbering and the *stef* [refrain].²⁰

The close connection between Sigurðr’s initial question and Odin’s answers ends in stanza 23. The following stanzas no longer answer Sigurðr’s question. There is only a hint of the *stef* and the numbering in *Reginsmál* 24, while in the other stanzas these are discarded in favor of a *scal*-formula (“Engr *scal*” *Rm* 23; “*scal* *koenna* *hverr*” *Rm* 25). The change of metre from *Reginsmál* 23 on also stresses the transition to a

new thematic unit. Odin now lists the rules of conduct a warrior needs to follow to achieve what the omens portend; they are summarized in the concluding aphorism “illt er fyr heill at hrapa” [It is bad to fall before the victory] (*Rm* 25). A wise warrior must pay attention to the correct time of day so that he will not have to fight with the rising or setting sun in his eyes. He must array his troops properly (i.e., in a wedge-shaped column) (“hamalt fylkia” *Rm* 23). He is also aware of bad omens that warn against battle (*Rm* 24). With these fundamentals of the art of warfare, Odin contributes to Sigurðr’s *sapientia*.²¹

The final rule of conduct leaves no doubt that Odin is conveying the basics of *sapientia* to his protégé. It is addressed to every thoughtful man (“kœnna hverr” *Rm* 25). The correspondence to Sigdrífa’s advice to comb and wash the dead (*Sd* 34) clarifies what is meant here: every thoughtful man makes provision in the morning (i.e., in good time) since he does not know where he will be by evening (“þvíat ósýnt er, hvar at apni kœmr” *Rm* 25).²²

Sigurðr’s Youthful Exploits (*Rm* 25pr–*Fm* 22)

The brief reference to the victory over the sons of Hunding is followed by a detailed account of the killing of Fáfnir. A detail of Sigurðr’s behavior in killing Fáfnir, which differs from *Völsunga saga*, gives indication of the image of Sigurðr at this stage of his development: Sigurðr and Fáfnir catch sight of each other only after Sigurðr has mortally wounded Fáfnir and emerges from the pit. In hiding from his enemy, Sigurðr follows Odin’s admonition that whoever catches sight of his enemy first will be victorious (*Rm* 22.4–6). But Sigurðr has learned not only from Odin but also from Reginn. His question to Odin (*Rm* 19), for which he used Loki’s question (*Rm* 3) as a model, already proved this.

The Codex Regius compilation of the poetry of Sigurðr’s youth foregrounds didactic dialogue. Narrative is handled succinctly in prose: just as in *Reginsmál*, the journey to the battle against the sons of Hunding becomes the narrative frame for the didactic dialogue with Hnikarr, so Sigurðr’s killing of Fáfnir has become the narrative frame for a wide-ranging dispute with the dying dragon. In terms of linguistic performance, the dialogue between Sigurðr and Fáfnir can

be structured as follows:²³

Part 1. Fáfnir's questions to Sigurðr

- a. regarding the name of the killer (*Fm* 1–4)
- b. regarding the name of the instigator (*Fm* 5–8)
- c. Fáfnir's advice to Sigurðr (*Fm* 9–11)

Part 2. Sigurðr's questions to Fáfnir

- a. wisdom dialogue (*Fm* 12–15)
- b. Sigurðr challenges Fáfnir's notion of courage (*Fm* 16–19)
- c. Fáfnir's advice to Sigurðr (*Fm* 20–22)

Reginsmál presents Sigurðr as a courageous hero and presents detailed evidence of his capacity for learning. *Fáfnismál* methodically expands Sigurðr's education and thus the hero's image in the Eddic poetry of Sigurðr's youth: as the following analysis of the linguistic performance will show, in the verbal duels with Fáfnir and Reginn, Sigurðr first develops and then gives evidence of his eloquence.

Part 1 (*Fm* 1–11)

When Sigurðr and Fáfnir catch sight of each other (“sá þá hvárr annan” *Fm* Pr9), Fáfnir asks his murderer for his name. He addresses him and his father both as *sveinn* [fellow/boy] to belittle him. A prose insertion (*Fm* 1pr) explains that Sigurðr conceals his name to avoid the curse of the dying dragon. He calls himself *göfuct dýr* [noble animal] and denies his father and mother.²⁴ Despite Fáfnir’s pejorative remarks, Sigurðr speaks in *valrúnar*, which shows his prudence. Sigurðr could have learned about the usefulness of concealing one’s name from Reginn’s account—Reginn told Sigurðr that Andvari concealed his lineage from Loki, though not his name. Merely the mention of his name, however, brought him harm (*Rm* 1–3).

In response to Sigurðr’s evasive answer, Fáfnir continues to provoke him by insinuating, with calculated ambiguity, that his lineage is ignominious.²⁵ Sigurðr replies to this insult by asserting his dominance, accusing Fáfnir of ignorance: “Ætterni mitt qveð ec þér ókunnict vera oc mic siálfan iþ sama” [My lineage, I think, is unknown to you, as am I myself] (*Fm* 4). As the climax of his assertion of dominance, he now lists (in a verbatim echo of Andvari’s answer) his name, his lineage, and his exploits.²⁶ In reacting to Fáfnir’s provocation in this way, he makes precisely that mistake, which, after having listened to Reginn’s tale of Andvari, he should have been able to avoid.²⁷

Apart from the alternation of insult and assertion of dominance typical of the *senna*, the verbal duel allows insight into Sigurðr’s character. He is aware of the correct behavior—he reacts to the first provocation with prudent restraint—but cannot control himself in the face of increased provocation, and he demonstrates a lack of *sapientia*.

Losing interest in his murderer’s identity, Fáfnir now asks after the instigator. Again he insultingly calls Sigurðr *sveinn*, but with the adjective *fráneygi* and his short characterization of Sigurðr’s father, he tries to present himself as knowledgeable, thus countering Sigurðr’s accusation of ignorance. Sigurðr is intent on avoiding naming Reginn, whether because he means to protect his foster father from Fáfnir’s curse or because in doing so he would admit to having been provoked. This time, however, Sigurðr does not use a circumlocution, as he did

in response to the question regarding his own name, but summarily rejects the suspicion of outside instigation with a reference to his own courage (“Hugr mic hvatti” *Fm* 6). Fáfnir attempts one more time to do what he succeeded with in his first question (*Fm* 3): he tries to provoke Sigurðr into revealing the name by denying that Sigurðr is a free man (“nú ertu haptr” *Fm* 7) and by accusing him of cowardice (“æ qveða bandingia bifaz” *Fm* 7)—a considerable intensification of the provocation as compared with *Fáfnismál* stanza 3.

In this way, Part 1b repeats the linguistic strategies of Part 1a: the question (*Fm* 1–*Fm* 5) and refusal to answer (*Fm* 2–*Fm* 6) are followed by Fáfnir’s increased provocation (*Fm* 3–*Fm* 7). This time, however, Sigurðr reacts differently: instead of divulging, in an attempt to assert his dominance what he should prudently withhold, he reproaches Fáfnir for trying to provoke him (“Því bregðr þú nú mér” *Fm* 8), denies the accusation of being a prisoner (“nú ertu haptr” *Fm* 7–“eigi em ec haptr” *Fm* 8), and asserts himself by referring to his recent heroic deed, the mortal wounding of Fáfnir (“þú fannt, at ec lauss lifi” *Fm* 8).²⁸

Fm 1–*Fm* 8 doubly demonstrates Sigurðr’s capacity to learn. A close comparison of the linguistic strategies shows Sigurðr’s learning success in the variation of the final replies (*Fm* 4–*Fm* 8): he does not repeat his mistake of revealing a name.

Formulated as advice, Fáfnir offers Sigurðr a warning to keep away from the gold: he tells him of the curse that lies on it. Fáfnir’s advice may have been well intentioned, but Sigurðr sees it as a renewed assertion of dominance, as proof of Fáfnir’s knowledge about the curse.²⁹ Using the same reasoning as Hreiðmarr earlier (*Rm* 9), Sigurðr refuses to take the advice. Fáfnir, incensed at this reaction, curses Sigurðr.³⁰ With “dómr ósvinnz apa” [judgment of a foolish ape] (*Fm* 11), Fáfnir may both refer to Reginn’s advice and again counter the accusation of ignorance by demonstrating his knowledge of the background of events.

Part 2 (*Fm* 12–22)

Sigurðr's questions to Fáfnir open the second part of the verbal duel. Here, halfway through the conversation, Sigurðr has become the questioner, and Fáfnir is relegated to giving answers. This change in role as well as the use of *Vafðrúðnismál's* *stef* (*Vm.* 26, 28) signal a wisdom dialogue to the knowledgeable audience. The formal resemblance to the questions put to Andvari (*Rm* 3) and Hnikarr (*Rm* 19) forms a link to the earlier wisdom dialogues. Sigurðr enquires about the norns who assist at the birth of a hero (*Fm* 12–13) and about the battlefield on which Ragnarök will take place (*Fm* 14–15). Then he asks about both the beginning and end of a hero's life (*Fm* 16–19) in two question-and-answer exchanges representative of mythological knowledge about the existence of the hero.

After showing his own knowledge about heroic existence, Fáfnir reflects back on his own life as a hero. Trusting in his terrifying appearance (*Ægishiálmr* “helmet of terror” *Fm* 16) and his power (*rammr* “mighty” *Fm* 16), he believed himself to be mightier than anyone. Sigurðr replies with an assertion of dominance: proudly he counts himself among the angry men (*vreiðir* *Fm* 17), since he has proven himself an equal to Fáfnir and his *Ægishiálmr*. Fáfnir's words (*Fm* 16) already hint at the inadequacy of mere courage. Ignoring Sigurðr's reply, Fáfnir continues in stanza 18 to reflect on his life: he snorted poison when he lay on his father's inheritance. Does the dying Fáfnir contemplate the mistakes he made during his life? Is he recalling how, trusting in his power and ability to terrify instead of heeding the warning against the accursed gold, he became a patricide?³¹ Sigurðr, however, does not react to Fáfnir's retrospection and reflection but admiringly returns to the topic of the *Ægishiálmr*, which has the ability to assist a brave hero to acquire even more *heiptr* and thus allows an intensification of his *fortitudo*.³² The significance of the *Ægishiálmr* to Sigurðr is also apparent in *Fáfnismál* 44 pr5: after he has taken possession of Fáfnir's gold, he immediately seizes the helmet.

Fáfnismál 20–22 repeat the speech strategies of *Fáfnismál* 9–11. The scribe only notes the initial letters, showing that he recognized the verbatim repetition (*Fm* 9.4–6 = *Fm* 20.4–6). Having realized his own

mistakes, Fáfnir's advice appears in its repetition as a well-meant warning. While Sigurðr refuses the advice in *Fáfnismál* 10 with an aphoristic phrase, in his second refusal (*Fm* 21), he skillfully echoes Fáfnir's words and turns them against him. Fáfnir's efforts to keep Sigurðr away from the treasure have failed. In his last words, he attempts to warn Sigurðr against Reginn.

Sigurðr was able to kill Fáfnir and thus demonstrate his physical superiority. In the following "Redekampf" (Heusler 1941, 105) or verbal duel, Sigurðr also demonstrates his mental superiority, and for the first time he shows what *Grípisspá* leads us to expect—"í orðom spacr" [he is wise in words] (*Grp* 7). With his final words, "þitt varð nú meira megin" [You have overpowered me] (*Fm* 22), Fáfnir concedes victory in the verbal fight.³³ But Sigurðr is not able to make use of Fáfnir's well-intentioned advice and his insights into his own mistakes. He only sees Fáfnir as an enemy whose warnings he emphatically rejects, and he insists on emphasizing his own courage.

Together with the lack of *sapientia*, *Fáfnismál* persistently demonstrates Sigurðr's willingness to learn. In its final shape here, the poetic material does not paint an unchanging picture of the young hero. Rather, the change Sigurðr undergoes shows him learning. He does not repeat mistakes once made; he does not respond a second time to Fáfnir's provocations (Section 1a–Section 1b). This contrasts with Sigurðr's obstinacy: trapped by his firm belief in courage and physical strength, he suspects hostile intent behind Fáfnir's well-meant advice and is not capable of making use of the dying dragon's insights.

Similarly, there is a change (and thus evidence of educational development) in Sigurðr's diction: increasingly he uses aphorisms. He speaks in aphorisms for the first time when he refuses to name the instigator of the killing (*Fm* 6). In his answer, he tops Fáfnir's phrase "áburno sciór á sceið" (*Fm* 5)³⁴ and shows himself for the first time "í orðom spacr." Fáfnir's advice is rejected with an aphorism that occupies an entire stanza (*Fm* 10). In contrast to Hreiðmarr (*Rm* 9), Sigurðr formulates his refusal as a universal truth.³⁵ The rejection of Fáfnir's self-portrait (*Fm* 17) as well as Sigurðr's responses to Reginn (*Fm* 24, 30, 31) are wholly phrased as aphorisms.³⁶

Quarrel with Reginn (*Fm* 22pr–31)

The frame narrative—Reginn returns from his hiding place (*Fm* 22pr), Sigurðr tastes Fáfnir's blood and understands the speech of the nuthatches (*Fm* 31pr)—presents Sigurðr's dialogue with Reginn as a single unit, subdivided into two by a prose passage:

Part 1. (*Fm* 23–26)

- a. Reginn's praise of Sigurðr and Sigurðr's rebuff (*Fm* 23–24)
- b. Reginn's allusion to revenge for his brother's death, and Sigurðr's rebuff (*Fm* 25–26)

Prose: Reginn cuts out Fáfnir's heart

Part 2. (*Fm* 27–31)

Verbal duel of Reginn and Sigurðr

The dialogue with Reginn results in an increasing alienation between Sigurðr and his educator and teacher. The contrast of their characters and the quarrel, which intensifies until Reginn is accused of cowardice, form the transition from a friendly relationship between Reginn and Sigurðr (cf. *Rm* Pr5) to a murderous one. A comparison with *Völsunga saga* confirms this function of the verbal duel as it is laid down in the Codex Regius. *Fáfnismál* 24 and 26, the stanzas in which Sigurðr spurns Reginn's praise, are missing from *Völsunga saga*; the narrative (*Fm* 26pr) and the instructions to roast the heart (*Fm* 27) form the ending. The stanzas *Fáfnismál* 28–30.3 are rendered by *Völsunga saga* in the same order, but *Fáfnismál* 30.4–31.6 are omitted; this tones down the accusation of cowardice.

Part 1 (*Fm* 23–26)

Reginn welcomes Sigurðr with a few pathetic words of praise—“nú hefir þú sigr vegit.” Are these words at this juncture meant to mark the end of Sigurðr’s youthful exploits, just as the welcoming words (*Rm* 13, 14) marked the beginning of his adolescence? Sigurðr rejects Reginn’s praise with an aphorism. Why?

Sprenger draws on the “mittelalterliche Königsideal der Demut” [medieval royal ideal of humility] (123) as explanation. But the rebuff can also be explained with reference to the dialogue structure: with the words “Fáfnir um farið” [have killed Fáfnir], Reginn celebrates his own victory. They are a “Frohlocken über die geglückte Rache” [exultation at the successful vengeance] (Heusler [1919] 1943, 42). By inciting his foster-son Sigurðr to the killing, he has achieved what he did not dare do himself (cf. *Rm* 11pr). That he was no more than a “Werkzeug des Bruderhasses” [tool of fraternal hatred] (Heusler [1919] 1943, 31) could have become obvious to Sigurðr during his fight against Fáfnir: after admitting to his name he was not struck by the anticipated curse, since Fáfnir was only interested in the instigator of the deed, whom he suspected to be Reginn (*Fm* 5). Like Reginn, Fáfnir too attempts to turn Sigurðr against his brother (*Fm* 22). By now Sigurðr seems to have become conscious of this connection and therefore rejects Reginn’s praise by countering with his own ironic praise of Reginn: as the instigator of his brother’s death, Reginn has shown his boldness without having to use the sword.

Reginn makes a second attempt with praise to which he links the indirect demand for vengeance for his dead brother: “Bróður minn hefir þú beniaðan” [You have slain my brother] (*Fm* 25). Sigurðr rejects this demand with a double justification: as instigator (“Þú því rétt” *Fm* 26), Reginn is not entitled to vengeance; and it was not the gold but Reginn’s inducement that drove Sigurðr to kill Fáfnir. Reproaching Reginn with the words “nema þú frýðir mér hvatz hugar” [if you had not challenged my courage], Sigurðr distances himself from his earlier self-assured statement toward Fáfnir: “Hugr mic hvatti.” Now he acknowledges that killing Fáfnir was not a heroic deed performed on his own initiative, but that he let himself be

goaded into it.

Part 2 (*Fm* 27–31)

Just as Reginn kept himself apart from Fáfnir's killing (*Fm* 28), so he now plans to sleep (*Fm* 27) while Sigurðr roasts Fáfnir's heart. The recurring *þú* and *ec* emphasizes the dichotomy between the two protagonists. Sigurðr is characterized as courageous and strong in contrast to the cowardly and lethargic Reginn.

In response to Sigurðr's reproaches, Reginn declares the quality of the sword to be more important than the physical strength Sigurðr displayed in the fight against Fáfnir (*Fm* 29). Here Sigurðr contradicts his teacher for the first time: he grants *hugr* more importance than the power of the sword. Sigurðr cites his eye-witness report ("ec sé" *Fm* 30) as proof of the accuracy of his assertion; he seems to have a particular situation in mind. His choice of words gives an indication: in the phrase "sigr vega," Sigurðr repeats the words with which Reginn praised the killing of Fáfnir (*Fm* 23). Following this allusion, Sigurðr offers himself as evidence: he is the *hvatr maðr* who with a blunt sword (i.e., without a sword) won the victory (i.e., the verbal victory) over Fáfnir. With this self-congratulation, Sigurðr concludes the dialogue with Reginn, which Reginn had begun with his self-congratulation on his successful whetting; Reginn's praise of the sword he forged ("ins hvassa hiörs" *Fm* 29) is countered by Sigurðr's praise of the "hvatan mann" (i.e., of himself).

Sigurðr contradicts him three times with the formula "er betri, enn sé." In this the redactor puts into Sigurðr's mouth words modelled as proverbial wisdom.³⁷ Like proverbs, Sigurðr's words teach through contrast. Thus, he proves himself superior to Reginn not only in his deployment of content but also of form.

Noteworthy are the different definitions of *hugr* put into Sigurðr's mouth in the dialogues with Fáfnir and Reginn. Sigurðr mentions *hugr* three times, each time in the context of physical strength. In *Fáfnismál* 6, he places *hugr* alongside the strength of his hands and that of his sword ("oc"); in *Fáfnismál* 19, he juxtaposes it with physical strength ("inn rammi ormr"). In his last words to Reginn, however, he emphasizes the difference in worth between *hugr* and the power of the sword: "Hugr er betri, enn sé hiörs megin" [Courage is better than the power of the sword] (*Fm* 30).

Just as with *hugr*, so the closely associated adjective *hvatr* changes meaning.³⁸ Sigurðr offers two different definitions: in *Fáfnismál* 6, he cites youthful exploits as a prerequisite for being *hvatr*. He perceives his own youthful exploit, the killing of Fáfnir, as proof of his own courage. But when he calls Reginn *hvatr* (*Fm* 24), he offers a second definition: one can be *hvatr* even without killing others. This new definition was prepared for in stanza 17; Sigurðr realizes that a terrifying demeanor alone is not sufficient to be *hvatr*. With this Sigurðr characterizes the hero, the *hvatr maðr*, as possessing qualities that are independent of strength (*Fm* 6), terrifying appearance (*Fm* 16–18), or quality of weapons (*Fm* 29).

Stanzas 30 and 31, with their resemblance to Solomonic proverbs, form the conclusion and culmination of Sigurðr's verbal duels and offer the most fully developed definitions of key terms: *hugr* is a virtue that stands above physical strength and weapons; to be *hvatr* is a character trait that distinguishes a man independently of external circumstances. In his dialogues with Fáfnir and Reginn, Sigurðr thus develops the term *hvatr* as the designation of an intrinsic quality, as the virtue of *fortitudo*—a significant change to the perception of *fortitudo* as the purely extrinsic, physical strength reflected in the splitting of the anvil or in the desire to possess the *Ægishiálmr*.

To this intensification of the meaning of *hvatr* correspond the increasingly definite formal statements: from a definition *ex negativo* (“fár er hvatr” *Fm* 6), Sigurðr moves through intermediate stages (“eingi er einna hvatastr” *Fm* 17; “margr er sá hvatr” *Fm* 24; “hvatan mann ec sé” *Fm* 30) toward the affirmative “hvötom er betra, enn sé óhvotom” [Brave is better than not brave] (*Fm* 31).

In the dialogues with Fáfnir and Reginn, Sigurðr displays pride in his courage and physical strength and thus proves himself as representative of a *fortitudo*-based heroism. In establishing the idea of the *hvatr maðr* and his virtue of *hugr*, Sigurðr distances himself from his teacher Reginn, who is presented as cowardly. Through his ability to learn and his skillful handling of proverbial wisdom, he moreover shows the prerequisite for *sapientia*. The partners in the next dialogues will develop this aptitude and complete Sigurðr's education, shaping a hero who combines *fortitudo* and *sapientia*.

Instruction by the Nuthatches (*Fm*

31pr-44)

The verse advice given by the nuthatches (*igður*) concludes with prose sections reporting how Sigurðr follows their directives:

In Part 1 (*Fm* 32–39), the nuthatches prompt Sigurðr to kill Reginn.

The following prose section (*Fm* 39pr) reports the killing of Reginn.

In Part 2 (*Fm* 40–44), the nuthatches advise Sigurðr to take the gold. Their advice and prophecies show him the way to Giuki and Sigdrífa.

The following prose section (*Fm* 44pr–*Sd* Pr11) reports that Sigurðr follows this advice.

The first two stanzas of Part 1 of the nuthatches' advice (*Fm* 32–33) once again contrast Sigurðr and Reginn: “Þar sitr Sigurðr” (cf. *Fm* 27: “Sittu nú, Sigurðr”)—“Þar liggr Reginn” (cf. *Fm* 28: “meðan þú í lyngvi látt”), establishing their connection to the preceding dialogue. Punctuating the often verbatim repetition suggesting that Reginn be killed (*Fm* 34, 38) are the reiterated exhortations to prudent behavior. The nuthatches provoke Sigurðr by denying his prudence. Their utterances are consistently in the subjunctive; in conditional clauses, they make his prudence dependent on correct behavior. Sigurðr shows a lack of prudence by not recognizing the threat himself; it takes three promptings culminating in the reproach “mið er ósviðr” [extremely foolish is he] (*Fm* 37) to induce Sigurðr to act. However, it is a sign of his prudence that he finally follows the nuthatches' well-intentioned advice (“ástráð mikit” *Fm* 35). Sigurðr is now not just a “hvatr maðr” (*Fm* 30) but a “horscr” [prudent] one. Part 1 concludes with a prose report which confirms that Sigurðr follows the prudent advice of the nuthatches in both word (*Fm* 39) and deed (*Fm* 39pr): he kills Reginn and eats Fáfnir's heart.

In Part 2, the nuthatches do not need to keep repeating their advice and urgings: the recurring incitement of Part 1 is no longer required. After Sigurðr has proved his prudence by killing Reginn, they stop denying that he is *horscr*. The MS makes clear that Sigurðr follows the advice by repeating the nuthatches' counsels (*Fm* 40–44) point by point in a continuous prose section, for which the Codex Regius supplies no heading (*Fm* 44pr–*Sd* Pr11):

The nuthatches advise Sigurðr:
Fm 40.1–4: Sigurðr is to take the gold.

Sigurðr follows the advice:
Fm 44pr1–7: Sigurðr takes what he finds in Fáfnir's lair.

Fm 40.5–41.8: Sigurðr is to ride to Giuki and marry Guðrún.

Fm 42: Sigurðr is to ride to Hindar- *Sd* Pr1: “Sigurðr reið up á Hindar-fíall.
fíall.”

Fm 42: There he will see a hall surrounded with flame (“eldi sveipinn, ór ... ógnar líoma”). *Sd* Pr2: “sá hann líós mikit, svá sem eldr brynni.”

Fm 43: Sigurðr will find a sleeping vakyríe. *Sd* Pr4–7: Sigurðr finds a fully armed sleeping figure—a woman.

Fm 44: Only he who is destined can break Sigrdrífa’s sleep (“svefni bregða”). *Sd* Pr7–1.4: Sigurðr is able to wake the woman; she identifies herself as Sigrdrífa and asks who broke the sleep-spell (“brá ec svefni”).

Fáfnismál 40.5–41.8 remain unconfirmed by later action. If the redactor had neglected to mention the stay with Giuki before the ride to Hindarfíall (cf. Grp.14: “gestr em ec Gíúca”), he would have likewise overlooked the marriage to Guðrún, which the nuthatches advise (“mundi kaupa” *Fm* 41).³⁹ Given the exact correspondence between *Fáfnismál* 40–44 and *Fáfnismál* Prose after stanza 44 to *Sigrdrífumál* 1.4, however, this assumption is clearly false. On the contrary, comparison between the advice of the nuthatches and Sigurðr’s subsequent actions makes evident that Sigurðr does not heed the birds’ counsel in every detail. If he had taken their prudent advice and married Guðrún before riding to Brynhildr/Sigrdrífa, the making and later breaking of the vow to Brynhildr would have been avoided.

In the quarrels with Fáfnir and Reginn, Sigurðr learns; he proves himself in the verbal duels and recognizes that true heroism is not through a terrifying appearance or a good weapon alone. The admonishment to prudent behavior by the nuthatches is the next step toward a conceptualization of heroism that combines *fortitudo* and *sapientia*.

Instruction by Sigrdrífa (*Fm* 44pr–Lacuna)

In the MS, *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrdrífumál* are one continuous lay, separated neither by a title nor a large initial.⁴⁰ The advice of

Sigrdrífa, linked directly to the nuthatches' advice through the prose transition, seems a logical continuation of the birds' counsel. Heeding the nuthatches' advice, Sigurðr became a "horscr maðr." Now he asks Sigrdrífa to teach him wisdom: "biðr hana [= Sigrdrífa] kenna sér speki" (*Sd* 4pr12). The biblical translation known as *Stjórn* substantiates *speki* as an equivalent term for *sapientia* (cf. Cleasby and Vigfusson 582). The discrepancy in *Völsunga saga* ch. 21 shows the deliberate use of *speki* in the Eddic redaction of the Sigurðr's youth material: *Völsunga saga* only mentions "stórra hluta" [great things] and "þat er yðr mætti líka" [that which might please you]. With these final instructions, Sigurðr expressly becomes what the preceding dialogues and quarrels have prepared him for: a hero who is able to combine *fortitudo* with *sapientia*.

The dialogue with Sigrdrífa is shaped by the use of *inquit*-formulae. These help understanding but also have a structuring function. An *inquit*-formula ("hann [= Sigurðr] svaraði" [he answered]) opens the initial part that, in a frame narrative, introduces Sigrdrífa. "Sigrdrífa qvað" marks *Sigrdrífumál* 5–14.3 as the words of Sigrdrífa. "Þá mælti Míms hofuð" puts the subsequent stanzas (*Sd* 15–19) into Mímir's mouth. The following structure results:

Frame narrative: Sigrdrífa's history (*Sd* 1.5–4pr)⁴¹

- (1) "Sigrdrífa qvað" (*Sd* 4pr14): Sigrdrífa's runic wisdom, marked as a unit through use of a consistent *stef* (*Sd* 5–14.3).
- (2) "Þá mælti Míms höfuð" (*Sd* 14.4):⁴² Mímir's runic wisdom (*Sd* 15–19), reported by Sigrdrífa in indirect speech.
- (3) After Sigurðr's request for further instruction, Sigrdrífa offers more general rules of conduct (*Sd* 20–lacuna).

A conclusion to the frame narrative is to be expected, but this has been lost in the lacuna.

Sigrdrífa asks the Æsir for "mál oc manvit ... oc læcnishendr" (*Sd* 4); she invokes them for inspiration and victory (*Sd* 3, 4). The knowledge imparted by the Æsir is passed on to her protégé Sigurðr. *Hyndluljóð* shows a similar constellation: Freyja requests instruction from the giantess Hyndla for her protégé Óttarr heimsci. The memory-drink featuring in both lays emphasizes the parallels. Thus, the frame narrative and the parallels with *Hyndluljóð* mark Sigrdrífa's words as a knowledge transfer.

The contents bear out what the form anticipates: in seven stanzas (*Sd* 6–14.3), Sigrdrífa imparts runic wisdom.⁴³ Each stanza begins

with the name of a runic category classified by its function. The following stanzas implement the frame narrative's promise with its plea for inspiration. Sigrdrífa calls to the gods for "sigr ... mál oc manvit ... oc læcnishendr" (Sd 3, 4). "Sigrúnar" (Sd 6), "málrúnar" (Sd 12), "hugrúnar" (Sd 13), and "biargrúnar" (Sd 9)/ "limrúnar" (Sd 11), respectively, are bestowed on her and her protégé. The powers invoked by Sigrdrífa have granted what she had requested.

The sequence of the runic categories shows a progressive move toward a climax: linking to the frame narrative, Sigrdrífa begins with *sigrúnar* and *ölrúnar*. The *biargrúnar*, *brimrúnar*, and *limrúnar* enable the hero to save (Sd 9, 10) and to heal (Sd 11). The culmination is the *málrúnar* and *hugrúnar*, which impart superiority in speech and wisdom in thinking ("geðsvinnari" Sd 13). This exact ordering could be the work of the Eddic redactor, since *Völsunga saga* has a different order. In this progression to superior wisdom, Sigrdrífa's teaching of runic lore continues the education of the young Sigurðr begun in the dialogues with Fáfnir, Reginn, and the nuthatches.

There are further noteworthy parallels with *Hyndluljóð*: what Odin grants in *Sigrdrífumál* through Sigrdrífa's agency he grants in person in *Hyndluljóð* (Hdl 3). Among other things, he there bestows "sigr" (cf. "sigrúnar" Sd 6), "mælsca" (cf. "málrúnar" Sd 4, 12), "manvit" (cf. Sd 4), and "mansemi" (analogous to "hugr"). Even though runes properly belonging to the sphere of black magic are part of Odin's knowledge, Sigurðr is not instructed in these.⁴⁴ Could the choice of runes, which in the poetry of Sigurðr's youth afford victory, help for others, and even wisdom, be expression of the intention of a final redactor?

Moreover, the runic wisdom of *Sigrdrífumál* cannot conceal its Christian orientation: Baetke (333) has already pointed out Christian elements in the runic wisdom of *Sigrdrífumál*: *signa* (Sd 7) can mean to make the sign of the cross.⁴⁵ Moreover, the names of the runic categories (except *málrúnar*) are *hapax legomena* and most likely late coinages.⁴⁶ The emphasis on runes, which assist (Sd 9–11) and impart wisdom (Sd 12–13), is quite obvious. Even the structure, the arrangement into seven categories of runes, suggests a final redaction influenced by Christianity: just as the nuthatches give in seven stanzas seven pieces of wise advice, so Sigrdrífa imparts in seven stanzas seven pieces of runic wisdom (Fm 32–38).⁴⁷

As wisdom teaching, the runes represent an advanced stage in Sigurðr's education. At the same time, the knowledge of runic wisdom makes Sigurðr a king. This is shown by the comparison of *Sigrdrífumál* 6–13 with *Rígsþula*—what distinguishes Jarl from the sons of the two

other estates is the education he receives from Rígr. As in *Rígsþula* when teaching passes from Rígr to Jarl, and by implication Jarl to Konr ungr, so in *Sigrdrífumál* Sigrdrífa imparts the Æsir's runic wisdom to Sigurðr.⁴⁸ According to medieval estates theory, familiarity with the written word and with the wisdom teachings of the Old Testament is indispensable for a ruler.⁴⁹ This medieval image of the ruler is projected back into a pre-Christian time, as *Sigrdrífumál* replaces literacy and scriptural wisdom with runic teaching. That the runic wisdom in *Sigrdrífumál* 15–19 is designated as Mímir's words is the crucial difference between the version of *Sigrdrífumál* preserved in the Codex Regius and the version transmitted in *Völsunga saga*. Despite largely verbatim agreement between *Sigrdrífumál* 6–lacuna to *Völsunga saga* ch. 21, *Völsunga saga* lacks *Sigrdrífumál* 13.4–14.6. Critical opinion has therefore regarded these stanzas as an addition by a newer hand.⁵⁰ But the *inquit*-formula's division of what in *Völsunga saga* is spoken entirely by Sigrdrífa into the runic wisdom of Sigrdrífa, on the one hand, and Mímir's teachings, on the other, results in the imparting of progressively more arcane wisdom just as Odin was in ancient times, so now Sigurðr is initiated by Sigrdrífa into the mysteries of Mímir's runic wisdom, the highest level of runic wisdom only bestowed on a select few.

However, in its communication of *speki*, *Sigrdrífumál* does not stop at this highest level of runic wisdom but surpasses it with rules of conduct influenced by Christianity (*Sd* 22–lacuna).⁵¹ These probably final and most important instructions to the hero Sigurðr are separated from the runic wisdom by Sigurðr's request for continued instruction (*Sd* 20–21). The *stef* “Þat ræð ek þér it ..., ef” as well as the consecutive numbering work to give the following section the appearance of a cohesive whole. In contrast to the runic wisdom, the usefulness of these Christian teachings does not seem to be time-limited: while the runes bestowed by Mímir are of use until the fall of the gods (“níóttu ... unz riúfaz regin” *Sd* 19), Sigurðr promises to keep to the following rules of conduct as long as he lives (“ástráð þín ec vil öll hafa, svá lengi, sem ec lifi” *Sd* 21). These rules of conduct are not only generally relevant to Sigurðr, but also to a thirteenth-century audience. Noteworthy is the first piece of advice (*Sd* 22), where Sigrdrífa counsels a friendly relationship with one's kin. This advice expresses one of the central concerns in this section of the heroic lay, probably the reason for its prominent position.⁵² The gradual escalation in the value of its teaching, as discussed in the interpretations of *Reginismál* and *Fáfnismál*, is also the guiding principle

of the redaction of *Sigrdrífumál*: in the quarrels with Fáfnir and Reginn, Sigurðr demonstrated his *fortitudo*, defining the terms *hvatr* and *hugr*. He showed himself to be wise by following the advice of the nuthatches. Sigrdrífa was asked for instruction in *sapientia*: “kenna sér speki.” Their allocation between the two speakers Sigrdrífa and Mímir as well as the order of the runic categories results in an escalation in value in this wisdom section: the wisdom of mythological antiquity in the runic teachings of the Æsir is continued and surpassed by Christian rules of conduct characterized by universal validity and timelessness. Mímir’s and Sigrdrífa’s rules of conduct both grant Sigurðr’s request for instruction in wisdom and at the same time form the conclusion and culmination of Sigurðr’s education as a hero who should distinguish himself in both *fortitudo* and *sapientia*—“aerii et caelo digni propter sapientiam et fortitudinem.” That these teaching convert Sigurðr into the ideal ruler is shown by the parallels between *Sigrdrífumál* and *Rígsþula*. A hero characterized by *fortitudo* and *sapientia* who at the same time fulfills his social obligations as a king, Sigurðr exemplifies the medieval Christian view of the ideal hero. The Codex Regius redaction of the Eddic poetry of Sigurðr’s youth charts his progress toward this state of perfection.

Notes

1. “Die Prosaabschnitte und Strophengruppen [der *Sigrdrífumál*] bilden dort [= im Codex Regius] eine Einheit mit den *Reginsmál* und *Fáfnismál*” [Here (i.e., in the Codex Regius) the prose sections and verse groups [of *Sigrdrífumál*] form a unit with *Reginsmál* and *Fáfnismál*] (Beck 8723). Assuming the literary unity of the Eddic poetry of Sigurðr’s youth, Judy Quinn comes to significant conclusions in her study of the change of metre: following Kragerud, she states that “the discursive forms deployed in *Fáfnismál* encode not only particular fields of experience, but also the interpersonal position of each speaker” (121).
2. “Frá dauða Sinfíotla,” “Frá dauða Fafnis” (Wimmer and Jónsson 52, 59).
3. At the points where later versions put the beginning of *Reginsmál* and the first stanza of *Fáfnismál* there are three-line-high *S*-initials (cf. Wimmer and Jónsson 56, 59). Neckel inserts the heading *Fáfnismál*, not transmitted in the Codex Regius, into the middle of a continuous piece of prose (Neckel and Kuhn 180), whereas Gering places it two sentences later (Hildebrand and Gering 301).
4. “Ein Isländer um 1230—d.h. nach Snorris Skaldenlehrbuch—vereinigte eine Anzahl Gedichte, die zusammen einen Lebenslauf Sigurds ergaben.” [But see Harris, cited in the preface above. Eds.]

5. Cf. Klaus von See on Hamðir's words in *Hm* 27 (165) and Curtius 183–184.
6. The diplomatic edition of Wimmer and Jónsson (1891) is authoritative. Titles of individual lays and stanza numbering are according to Neckel/Kuhn; footnotes will call attention to any deviations of this edition from the MS.
7. This is suggested by the following passages (cf. Detter and Heinzel 2: 404): (1) *Rm* Pr6: “forellri síno” could mean Sigurðr's ancestors (cf. Cleasby and Vigfusson 529 on the personal pronoun); (2) *Rm* 8: if Loki's curse is supposed to fall on Hreiðmarr, “niðia stríð um nept” must refer to Hreiðmarr's descendants; (3) *Rm* 11: Sigurðr as the killer of Fáfnir would be the avenger Hreiðmarr hopes for.
8. Cf. *Völsunga saga*: Reginn does not love Sigurðr but intends the destruction of both Sigurðr and Fáfnir from the beginning.
9. Cf. *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 39: “en er hann [= Óðinn] sá bauginn þá sýndist honum fagr, ok tók hann af fénu” [but when he [= Óðinn] saw the ring, it seemed beautiful to him, and he took the precious thing off] (Sigurðsson *et al.* 1: 354).
10. As in *Reginsmál*, these stanzas are only tenuously connected to the narrative, and they are most probably interpolations of Christian content (cf. Gering 166). *Sólarljóð* 67 ranks the punishment of a liar among the seven deadly sins. “Die Vorstellung eines Jenseitsortes als Strafort stammt sicherlich aus der christlichen Visionsliteratur des Mittelalters” [The notion of an after-world as the location of punishment surely has its roots in medieval Christian vision literature] (Simek 428).
11. That Reginn's report is intended to incite Sigurðr against Fáfnir is shown by Sigurðr's remark, “Mikit hefir þú látit, ok stór illir hafa þínir frændr verit” (*Völsunga saga* ch. 14; cf. ed. Finch 26).
12. Cf. Detter and Heinzel 2: 404 for the same reading.
13. “Er mér fangs vón at frecom úlfi” (*Rm* 13); “síá mun ræsir rícstr und sólo” (*Rm* 14).
14. Cf. Gering 172.
15. Cutting through a hank of wool floating in a river seems to be a frequent test for the sharpness of swords (cf. *Þiðrekssaga*; Voigt 132; Heusler [1919] 1943, 45).
16. “ob der einmalige amboßspaltende Hieb einst mit dem Schwert geschah, eine Waffenprobe—oder mit dem Hammer, ein Zeichen der überschüssigen Kraft, der Untauglichkeit zum Handwerk” (Heusler [1919] 1943, 44).
17. Cf. *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 26–27), where no reason for the priority of vengeance is given.
18. There are different focal points in *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 29): a short section reports Odin's admission onto the ship, only *Rm* 18 is quoted, and the dialogue with Hnikarr is completely omitted; instead *Völsunga saga* compiles stereotypes into a long battle narrative.
19. *Segðu (mér) þat*, ⟨name⟩, ⟨conditional clause⟩: *hver* (*Rm* 3 and *Rm* 19).
20. “Þat er annat, ef þu” (*Rm* 21); “Þat er iþ þriði, ef þu” (*Rm* 22).
21. Knowledge of the art of war is part of *sapientia* (cf. Curtius 184).

22. Cf. also *Háv* sts. 33 and 61.
23. Cf. Jónsson 273–274.
24. For a detailed discussion of *Fm* 2–5, see Ólafsson 1970; for interpretations of *gofuct dýr*, see Gade 1990.
25. “Af hverio vartu undri alinn?” (*Fm* 3). Cf. Cleasby and Vigfusson, s.v. “undr”: “—a wonder ... 2. with the notion of *shame, scandal*.”
26. Cf. *Rm* 2 and *Fm* 4.
27. Cf. *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 31), where a change in the sequence of the quoted stanzas (*Fm* 1, *Fm* 4.1–3, *Fm* 2, *Fm* 3, *Fm* 4.1–3) results in a different speech strategy: Sigurðr reveals his name directly after having been provoked.
28. Cf. Quinn 122.
29. Cf. *Rm* 5.
30. Cf. Sigrun’s curse against Dagr (*HHII* 32). In *Völsunga saga* (ch. 18; ed. Finch 32), the words are well-meant advice not to set out to sea in the wind.
31. He hints at the patricide with “arfi ... míns foður.”
32. *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 32) has a different order.
33. The reference to the time of this victory (*nú*) makes it implausible that Fáfnir should be referring to the physical fight that happened some time ago. *Völsunga saga* omits this sentence (ed. Finch 33).
34. See Collinder and Strömbäck.
35. He uses (1) “scal” rather than “huggec mic” and (2) “þvíat eino sinni scal alda hvern fara til heliar heðan” rather than “svá lengi sem ec lifi.”
36. The aphorism in *Fm* 17.4–6 is closely paralleled in *Háv* 64.
37. Cf. *Háv* 71, 124, 145; *Sd* 26, 31. In the Old Testament, there are frequent occurrences of the formula “melios est ... quam.” Cf. Proverbs 3.14 and elsewhere.
38. The etymologically related *hvass* (Vries 269–270) is used in other Eddic lays with reference to warriors (*HHII* 11; *Ghv* 12), but *Fáfnismál* restricts the use of *hvass* to weapons (*Fm* 6, 28, 29) and reserves *hvatr* for people (*Fm* 6, 17, 24, 26, 30, 31).
39. Cf. Gering 201: “Daß [*Fáfnismál*] 40 und 41 sich auf Guþrún beziehen, die Sigurþr heiraten ... soll, ist unbestreitbar” [It is indisputable that (*Fáfnismál*) 40 and 41 refer to Guþrún, whom Sigurðr is supposed to marry].
40. Neckel/Kuhn depart substantially from the Codex Regius in the separation of the text into the two independent lays *Fáfnismál* and *Sigrðrífumál*, as well as in the arrangement of the stanzas in *Sigrðrífumál*.
41. In the MS, *Sd* 1.5 is marked as the beginning of a stanza with a marginal capital S; in terms of contents, Sigurðr’s journey to Sigrðrifa still belongs to the dialogue with the nuthatches.
42. Neckel/Kuhn here depart from the MS; *Sd* 14.4 is marked as the beginning of a stanza with a marginal capital Þ.

43. *Sd* 8.4–6 is only transmitted in *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 36); *Sd* 7–*Sd* 8.1–3 are a single stanza in the MS.
44. Cf. *Háv* 157, 161, 162.
45. “Ein christliches Lehnwort (der entsprechende heidnische Ausdruck scheint nach dem Zeugnis der Runenschriften *vígja* gewesen zu sein)” [A Christian loan word—according to runic inscriptions the corresponding pagan expression was *vígja*].
46. Only documented in later poetry: *GkvI* 23 and *Snorra Edda* (Sigurðsson *et al.* 1: 598, 1.24).
47. The number seven is typical in Christian wisdom; cf. the Seven Pillars of Wisdom (*Konungsskuggsjá* ch. 56), Proverbs 9.1, *Sólarljóð* 32 (Jónsson 640). Could there be a connection between Sigurðr’s education and the seven liberal arts?
48. Cf. *Rg* 43–45.
49. Cf. *Konungsskuggsjá* ch. 56.
50. For example, Gering 213: “*Sd* 13.4–14.6 sind vermutlich aus einem Ópensliede hierher geraten” [*Sd* 13.4–14.6 were probably transferred here from a lay about Odin].
51. On the Christian elements in *Sigrðrífumál*, cf. von See (97) and Baetke ([1951] 1973, 333).
52. Cf. Haimelr 239–246.

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3

Dragons in the Eddas and in Early Nordic Art

Paul Acker

Not long ago, I leafed through a children's book titled *Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like* by Jay Williams. The moral of the story was that nobody knows what a dragon looks like, that different sorts of people (the merchant, the mayor, etc.) create the sort of dragon (in this case, Chinese dragon) that best fits their view of the world. Nonetheless, I think most everyone would claim to know what the legendary European dragon looks like: it has four legs, a long tail, leathery wings, a scaly body, and it breathes fire. It is a monster but not an impossible creature, if one extrapolates from living and extinct reptiles, from crocodiles and dinosaurs such as the stegosaurus and the pterodactyl. A recent film, *Reign of Fire* (dir. Rob Bowman 2002), even offers a scientific explanation for how the (post-apocalyptic) dragons manage to exhale fire: they possess "two glands in the mouth [that] secrete separate chemicals"; these "combine in exhalation" and become "nitro-napalm."

But in many ways, this view is all wrong for the medieval dragon. If we look at manuscript illuminations of dragons in Northern Europe most any time between 900 and 1450, we find instead an impossible, composite creature, one we might call the Romanesque (and Gothic) dragon. It has the scaly body of a serpent, devolving into a mass of coils, the feathery wings of a bird, the head, ears, and teeth of a predator (often a wolf), and two front legs of a mammal or bird of prey.¹ If we go back a little further, such as the dragon depicted in the Trier Apocalypse (ca. 800), we strip away the mammalian head and legs and find just a coiled serpent with feathery wings.² Or, if we look

at the Biblical dragon vanquished by Christ in the Utrecht Psalter (816–35), we find nothing more than a coiled serpent.³ That is to say, the dragon evolves from a serpent that is monstrous only by virtue of its size (such, for instance, is Isidore’s seventh-century definition of *draco*),⁴ to a serpent that has had various body parts stuck onto it like a children’s toy. Indeed, a young Leonardo da Vinci used bits of animals (lizards, serpents, butterflies and bats) to construct a dragon-like monster in just this way (Vasari 4.93).⁵ Pages of his sketch-books survive in which he draws rather muscular-looking kittens at play alongside a four-legged dragon adopting an attitude clearly based on the kittens.⁶ Da Vinci and Raphael are among the early modern innovators who added the hind legs to the dragon, probably in an effort to ground it more realistically in their landscapes rendered with an early modern sense of perspective.⁷

If we attend closely to descriptions of Fáfnir in the Poetic Edda, we find a dragon in an early stage of evolution. How do you kill a dragon in Old Norse? The prose introduction to *Fáfnismál* (*ante* 1270) answers in this way:

Sigurðr oc Reginn fóro up á Gnitaheiði oc hitto þar slóð Fáfnis, þá er hann screið til vatn. Þar gorði Sigurðr gröf micla á veginom, oc gecc Sigurðr þar í. Enn er Fáfnir screið af gullino, blés hann eitri, oc hraut þat fyr ofan höfuð Sigurði. En er Fáfnir screið yfir gröfna, þá lagði Sigurðr hann með sverði til hiarta. Fáfnir hristi sic oc barði höfði oc sporði. (Ed. Neckel and Kuhn 180)

[Sigurðr and Reginn went up onto Gnita-heath and there found Fáfnir’s track, where he slithered (*screið*) to the water.⁸ Sigurðr dug a big pit there in the path and went into it. And when Fáfnir slithered away from the gold, he breathed forth venom, and it fell down onto Sigurðr’s head. And when Fáfnir slithered over the pit, Sigurðr stabbed him in the heart with his sword. Fáfnir shook himself and lashed about with his head and tail.⁹]

If this *ormr* winged its way to the water, it would not leave a track, and if it thundered along on four legs like a dinosaur, it would not do a hero much good to stand in a pit thrusting up at it. This creature slithers along the ground on its belly; it is indeed a (giant) *ormr* or serpent. Snorri, commenting on an image in a skaldic poem, even tells us this behavior is usual for (ordinary) serpents: “Þat heldr til ormsins nátturu at hann skríðr ór hamsi svá at hann skríðr mjök til vatns” (*Háttatal* ch. 6, ed. Faulkes 7). [It is in the serpent’s (*ormsins*) nature that it slides out of its skin and slithers along towards the water.] When, however, we read the same Fáfnir-slaying episode recounted in prose in *Völsunga saga* (composed using Eddic material and around the same time that the Poetic Edda is being written down, *ca.* 1270),¹⁰ a

subtle change has occurred. Sigurðr now stabs the *ormr* “up under the left shoulder,” or *bæxlit* (ch. 18, ed. Finch 30–31):

Nú ríða þeir Sigurðr ok Reginn upp á heiðina á þann farveg er Fáfnir var vanr at skríða er hann fór til vatns ... Sigurðr gerði gröf eina ... Ok er ormrinn skreið til vatns ... Hann fnýsti eitri alla leið fyrir sik fram ... Ok er ormrinn skreið yfir gröfina, þá leggr Sigurðr sverðinu undir bæxlit vinstra ...

[Now Sigurðr and Reginn ride up onto the heath to the track where Fáfnir was accustomed to slither when he went to the water ... Sigurðr dug a pit ... And when the dragon slithered to the water ... He snorted forth poison all along the path ... And when the dragon slithered over the pit, then Sigurðr thrust his sword under its left shoulder].¹¹

Where is the shoulder on a snake? Fáfnir appears to have sprouted limbs, wings, or perhaps both: he has evolved into the Romanesque dragon.¹²

A passage in *Ketils saga hængs*, like *Völsunga saga*, a *fornaldarsaga* or legendary-heroic romance set in ancient Scandinavia, helps distinguish between the old and new forms of dragon. Ketill sees a *dreki*; the saga-writer employs the word for dragon borrowed ultimately from Latin and Greek, as against the native Germanic word *ormr*. (The Poetic Edda, incidentally, never calls Fáfnir a *dreki*, only an *ormr*; the only *dreki* in the Poetic Edda is Níðhöggr, the winged dragon in hell that is likely a late, perhaps even Christian, addition to the otherwise pagan cosmology outlined in *Völuspá* [st. 66]. And Fáfnir does not breathe fire; he lashes dangerously, but his main weapon is poison.¹³) Ketill’s *dreki* “hafði lykkju ok sporð sem ormr, en vængi sem dreki. Eldr þótti honum brenna ór augum hans ok gini” [had a coil and tail like a serpent (*ormr*) but wings like a dragon (*dreki*). Fire seemed to burn forth from his eyes and maw] (ed. Guðni Jónsson 2.153). Modern readers of *Beowulf* are perhaps used to thinking of the Germanic *wyrm* or *ormr* as a flying dragon that breathes fire, but for the author of *Ketils saga hængs*, the *ormr* and *dreki* were still distinct creatures. A few other passages in Old Norse texts indicate a similar distinction. The fourteenth-century chivalric romance *Konráðs saga keisarasonar* depicts a situation in which “engi maðr ma vtan borgar vera vnðir berrvm himni fyrir sakir skriðorma [ok] flogdreka” [No man may stay outside the city in the open air because of the slithering-serpents (*skriðorma*) and flying-dragons (*flogdreka*)] (ed. Zitzelsberger 59). A passage in *Antonius saga*, a saint’s life in the late medieval collection *Reykjahólabók*, catalogues a number of dangerous creatures, including *ormar* and *drekar*, and *lindormar* and *flogdrekar* (snake-serpents and

flying dragons)—as well as lions, tigers, scorpions and basilisks (ed. Loth 2.273).

If the native, or at least more ancient, Norse tradition of the *ormr* imagined a monstrosly large, poison-spitting serpent, when and from where does the concept arise of the *dreki*, which flies, sometimes spews fire, and sometimes has two front legs and claws? As soon as they acquired the skill of writing the Latin alphabet, the Norwegians and Icelanders imported a number of new narratives from Christian Europe. Saints' lives, as Christine Rauer has recently demonstrated in connection with *Beowulf*, often depicted men and women who overcame *dracones*, large serpents whose breath was poisonous, in a few instances fiery, but always pestiferous; indeed, such *dracones* often read like corporealized plagues. A typical example translated into Old Norse is the life of Sylvester, in which a *dreki* has been killing or making ill a number of Romans because they have stopped sacrificing to him. Sylvester approaches the dragon, recites the creed at it, and ties up its mouth with string (*HMS* ed. Unger 2.274–2.276). St. Margaret's encounter with a dragon was particularly well known. Shut up in a dark room, Margaret is approached by a fierce *dreki* that lights up the place with the fire coming from its mouth and nostrils. The dragon swallows Margaret, but when she comes up against its heart, it bursts asunder and Margaret emerges whole (*HMS* ed. Unger 1.478). Margaret emerging from the split dragon was a favorite subject of manuscript illuminations and also qualified her to be a patron saint of childbirth. The closely related *postola sögur* or apostles' sagas likewise depict encounters of holy men with dragons. In the apocryphal Acts of St. Matthew, two magicians conjure up flying *drecar* that blow smoke, fire, and brimstone from their nostrils. The apostle signs himself and steps out to meet them, whereupon the dragons fall asleep and the magicians cannot wake them back up. Matthew then recites the creed at the dragons, and they lift up their heads, exit the city gates, and are never seen again (*PS* ed. Unger 836). The account gains added significance in that the Latin original, the *Historica Apostolica* of pseudo-Abdias, was written around the year 600 and thus contains the only account of fire-breathing dragons I have found that pre-dates *Beowulf*.¹⁴ Typically, the fiery breath of these hagiographical dragons is mere show and has no demonstrable effect. Less typical is an exemplum incorporated in *Nikolaus saga erkibiskups II* (ca. 1340), in which a greedy English deacon is set on the right path by a dragon sent by God. It rises up from the sea, breathing forth venom, fire, and brimstone. In an instant it burns up the deacon's church and

residence, and when the deacon flees with his booty to a waiting ship, it burns up the ship and its cargo as well (*HMS* ed. Unger 2.57–2.59).¹⁵ The deacon comprehends the wrath of God and decides to mend his ways.

Dragons also reached Scandinavian shores by way of romances translated from French and German. The earliest of these was probably *Tristrams saga*, translated into Norwegian in 1226 by a brother Robert, who may have come to Norway from Anglo-Norman England (Kalinke 3–4). Robert worked from the version of the Tristan legend by Thomas of Britain (i.e., Thomas from Anglo-Norman France or England). Thomas’s version survives only fragmentarily, but he appears to have introduced a dragon episode into the story. Tristram slays a dragon in Ireland in order to win the hand of the princess Ísönd. This dragon is not said to fly, but it does breathe fire and in fact burns up Tristram’s horse before the knight is able to cut the dragon in half (chs. 35–36, ed. Bjarni Vilhjálmsson 1.89–1.92).

Also translated in Norway, probably before 1257 (Kalinke 5), was Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain*, which contains a well-known scene in which the knight rescues a lion from a fire-breathing serpent; the lion then becomes his faithful and helpful companion. The serpent had been holding onto the lion’s tail and was large and powerful enough to do so (much like the bestiary dragons that wrapped themselves constrictor-like around elephants) but apparently was not a flying dragon (*Ívens saga* ch. 10, ed. Blaisdell 100, tr. 198). *Þiðreks saga*, compiled and translated ca. 1260 from German traditions of Theoderic of Bern, depicts a more fully developed Romanesque dragon or *flugdreki*. It flies along, laboriously, dragged down by the weight of an armored man it has half-swallowed. It has claws that strike the ground when it fails to get enough lift (ch. 105, ed. Guðni Jónsson 1.156–1.157). When later Icelandic romancers incorporated the motif of the lion-knight, they combined Chrétien’s fiery serpent with the flying type of dragon in *Þiðreks saga*. In *Sigurðr saga þögla*, for example, the hero sees a dragon and lion embroiled in combat as in *Ívens saga*, but this time the dragon is flying along, weighted down by the lion in its claws. It exhales poison and fire, conceived realistically enough that Sigurðr thinks the forest is in danger of being consumed in flames. Sigurðr rescues the lion by stabbing the dragon just below its wings (ch. 16, *LMIR* ed. Loth 2.141–2.143).¹⁶

We can now see why in *Völsunga saga*, the dragon is pierced under its *bæxl* or shoulder, whether behind its (two) legs or in its “wing-pits,” as Philip Cardew has recently translated the word in a derivative

passage in *Gull-Þóris saga* (ch. 4, Cardew 138). In that account, fairly well known since it has been adduced as a Beowulfian analogue, Gold-Þórir and his men find dragons sleeping on a hoard of gold in a cave behind a waterfall. They manage to strike some of the dragons under the *bægsli*, but the dragons fly out of the cave, spewing poison and fire. The largest dragon flies off with a man in its mouth, as in *Þiðreks saga*.¹⁷ Dragons are also struck “under the wing-pit” in *Trojumanna saga*, *Ectors saga*, and *Blomstrvalla saga*.¹⁸ *Völsunga saga* is likely the ultimate origin of this shoulder-stabbing motif, as well as for the obsolescent technique of waiting for the dragon to slither to the water, which shows up in *Þórsteins þáttur forvitna* in *Flateyjarbók* (ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson 436).

Dragons in Nordic Art: Manx Stone Crosses

The evolution of Sigurðr’s monstrous adversary from serpent to dragon can also be discerned in Scandinavian pictorial representations.¹⁹ The earliest of these are found carved into stone crosses on the Isle of Man, executed by the Vikings who had settled there. In Kermodé’s numbering system, these are stone crosses no. 93 from Jurby, 94 from Malew, and 95 from Kirk Andreas, all dated *ca.* 950 based on the Jellinge style of their animal ornamentation.²⁰ Each depicts, among other episodes from the Sigurðr cycle,²¹ the hero stabbing Fáfnir (see Kermodé 174–178, pls. XLIII–XLV; the dragons are drawn separately on p. 57). The clearest of these is on the Jurby cross. Sigurðr is shown standing, or rather lying (if we shift the vertical composition to a horizontal one) within an outlined dome, stabbing through a gap into a dragon that has no legs or wings ([Figure 3.1](#)). Instead, the dragon (i.e., Fáfnir) is carved in double contour as an articulated band curved in an S-shape, with his head bending down toward Sigurðr and the end of his tail curling up. While the Jellinge style tends to abstract all animals into a ribbon shape, it does incorporate front and hind limbs when desired.²² Accordingly, it appears that Fáfnir on the Manx crosses is depicted in the same way as can be deduced from the Eddic accounts, as a serpent slithering on the ground, vulnerable to Sigurðr lying in wait beneath him.



Figure 3.1 Stone cross from Jurby, Isle of Man, detail of Sigurðr and Fáfnir, redrawn. Kermode *Manx Crosses* (1907); public domain.

Swedish Runestones

The earliest runestones, such as the Rök stone from the early ninth century,²³ divide their inscriptions into rows or columns, with a line incised above and below the runes so that they appear inside bands.²⁴ The Rök stone preserves a quite lengthy inscription, including what

may be the earliest stanza of Scandinavian heroic poetry (about Theodoric, prince of the Mærings, who is also mentioned in the Old English poem *Deor*; see Jansson 1962, 118–121).²⁵ Later runestones, however, have briefer inscriptions (usually stating that the stones are carved and raised in memory of a beloved relative),²⁶ and so the runes can be confined to a single band around the outside of the stone.²⁷ It occurred to the artists (in central Sweden especially; see Sawyer 26) that they could add a head and tail to this band and turn it into a rune animal, whether an abstract zoomorph (ribbon animals were popular in early Scandinavian art, including the Jellinge style of the tenth century) or more literally a serpent. The earliest of these bands suggest a serpent merely by placing an eye on either side of the head, as if seen from above, in the so-called bird’s-eye-view style of depiction.²⁸ Anne-Sofie Gräslund, who has categorized these rune animals into a relative and fixed chronology, assigns this bird’s-eye phase (in Swedish *fågelperspektiv*, abbreviated Fp) in Uppland, Sweden (where rune-stones are the most numerous) to the years ca. 1010–1050.²⁹ Alternatively, rune carvers could draw on other prevailing artistic fashions in depicting the rune animals, this time with the heads in profile. In the earliest of such instances, in what Gräslund terms profile style 1 (Pr1) and dates to the years ca. 1010–1040, the animals display features of the Ringerike style.³⁰

The most famous of the runestones depicting scenes from the Sigurðr legend, the “Ramsund stone,” is rendered in this “Pr1” style (Sö 101).³¹ The inscription is carved not on a standing runestone but rather on a large rock face,³² about 4.6 meters across.³³ Sigurðr stands or crouches on bent knees below the bottom rune band (representing Fáfnir), stabbing through it with a sword. [Figure 3.2](#) assigns numbers to the many legendary scenes depicted on the inner field, all of which (in my reading) follow on the slaying of Fáfnir, to wit:

- 1) Sigurðr roasts the heart of Fáfnir on a stick over a fire, his thumb in his mouth [he has burned his finger testing the heart to see if it is done; tasting its blood allows him to understand the speech of birds; *Fm.* prose after st. 31]
- 2) Two birds perch in the tree [seven birds in *Fm.* sts. 32–8; they advise that Sigurðr should behead Reginn]
- 3) Reginn lies dead, beheaded, his smith’s hammer, bellows and anvil beside him [*Fm.* prose after st. 39; Reginn had forged a sword for Sigurðr, *Fm.* st. 29]
- 4) Sigurðr’s horse Grani, a pack or chest (for the treasure) on his

back, is tethered to a tree, with Fáfnir's head hanging from it [*Fm.* prose at end, Sigurðr loads Grani with the treasure]

5) [Sigurðr slays Fáfnir, as per above; *Fm.* introductory prose]

6) A four-legged animal, probably a wolf, stands near Reginn's corpse [see *Fm.* st. 35].³⁴



Figure 3.2 Ramsund stone (Sö 101), scenes from the legend of Sigurðr, diagram. Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Dragon heads are found at the end of the two upper bands; they each have prominent teeth in their upper and lower jaws. The upper bands link up in the middle and, together with the bottom band, enclose scenes 1–4 and 6. The band at the bottom does not have a dragon head unless we consider that it is the decapitated one shown hanging from a tree in the central scenes!

Sigurðr stabbing through a rune band is also depicted on the Gök rune-stone (Sö 327), often thought to be a poor copy of the Ramsund stone, with much the same elements (Margeson 191); so, too on the Drävle runestone (U 1163), perhaps accompanied by the dwarf Andvari and the valkyrie Sigrdrífa.³⁵ Other runestones feature carvings of animals that can be harder to identify since they have no known legendary context, but many of these also seem to be dragons, sometimes with thinner snakes, unmarked by runes, wrapped around them. In later artistic styles, moving from Ringerike into the Urnes style, these serpent dragons evolve in ways like those we have already seen in European art elsewhere and in Norse literature: they sprout wings and develop front legs. The relevant runestones are little known and have never been adduced in this connection.³⁶

On runestone U 1031, the thinner snake has rudimentary wings drawn swept back and close into its body. Its head has eyes and

perhaps also ears, shown from above (style Fp).³⁷ Runestone U 1043 has similar wings on its thin serpent, although they are more angular and held out a little farther from the body.³⁸ The main rune beast is carved in the Urnes style (Pr3–Pr4) and thus probably dates from *ca.* 1050–1100. On U 1142 (Pr3–Pr4), the thin serpent’s wings are a bit rounded on the upper edge, and they are given spiral joints.³⁹ Runestones U 1031, 1043, and 1142 are all signed in runes by a carver named Ásmundr.

On runestone U 295 (Pr4, a phase dated *ca.* 1070–110 by Gräslund 2006, 126), the wings are long, held out widely, and some feathers are marked with straight lines.⁴⁰ This dragon is as big as the runeband animal, which has a bent front leg; thin serpents intertwine around both creatures.⁴¹ U 305 (Pr4) also has fairly long, straight wings with feathers marked, but this time the winged dragon is the rune creature, intertwined with a thin serpent, although it does not form a border around a field as the rune creatures usually do (Figure 3.3).⁴² Runestone U 107 also has a dragon for its rune creature, although its head is in the Fp rather than Urnes style.⁴³ It has joint spirals below some oddly shaped wings with a horizontal upper edge; below them are added something new: a pair of legs, also with joint spirals. The unmarked dragon intertwined (and in combat) with the runeband creature on U 887 (Pr4) most resembles the Romanesque dragon and thus comes closest to our modern conception.⁴⁴ It is drawn in profile rather than a bird’s-eye view, so that its wing is folded above its back, with separately drawn feathers and a joint spiral. Beneath its belly is a bent front leg, with a spiral at its hip joint, ending in a talon that grasps its own tail as it loops by. Its head, unfortunately partway broken off, is presumably in the same Urnes profile style as that of the runeband creature, which has a bent front leg but no wings. The accompanying photograph of U 887 (Figure 3.4) has been digitally retouched by Kalle (Dahlberg) Runrístare, “the Runecarver,” to make the winged dragon stand out from the rune-band creature surrounding it.

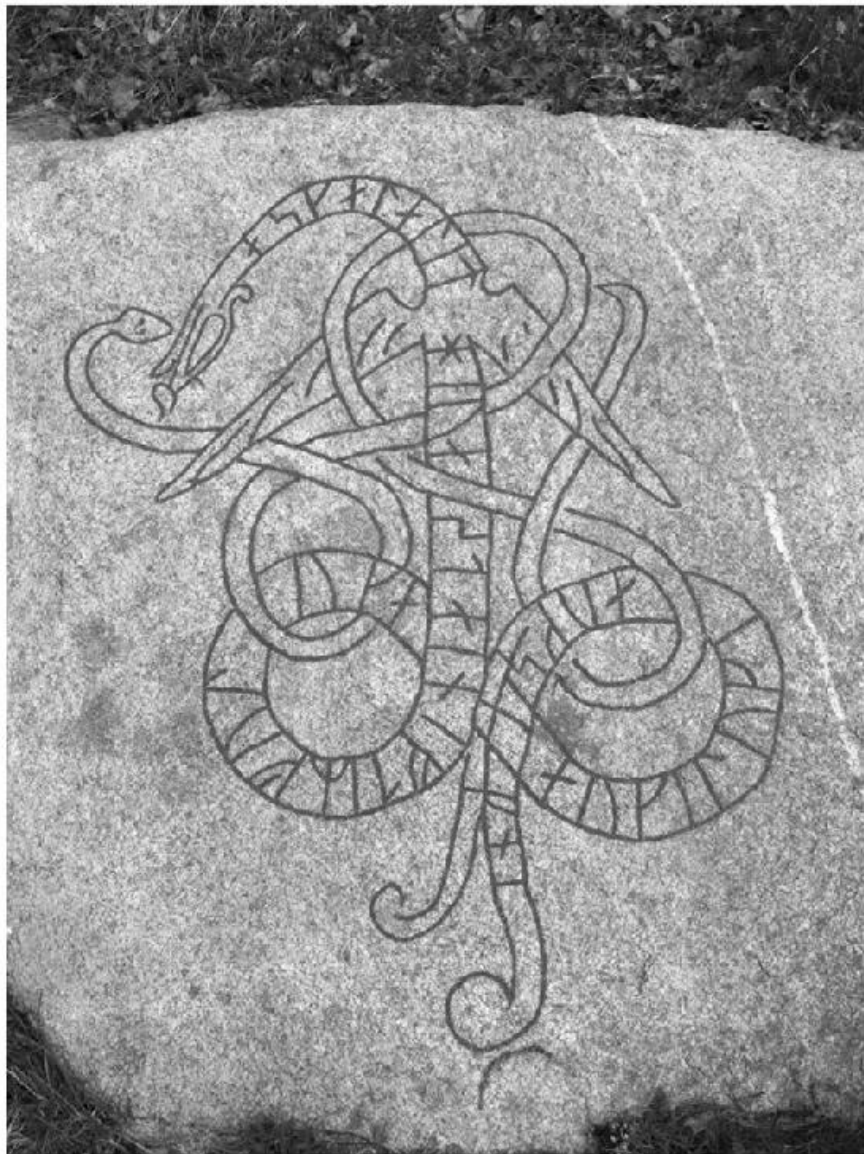


Figure 3.3 Runestone U 305, winged dragon. Photo by Christer Hamp.



Figure 3.4 Runestone U 887, winged and two-legged dragon. Digitally altered photo by Kalle Dahlberg.

Norwegian Stave Churches

The full-fledged Romanesque dragon, with wings and two legs, is much in evidence in the splendid woodcarvings in Norwegian stave churches (see Hohler for a full study). Three of these churches contain programs of illustration showing scenes from the legend of Sigurðr, the most famous being in the portal formerly at Hylestad (now at Universitets Oldsaksamling, Oslo), dating from the second half of the twelfth century.⁴⁵ Hohler describes the scenes thus:

1. *Regin forges a small sword for Sigurd*
2. *Sigurd breaks the false sword*
3. *Sigurd kills Favne* [Fáfnir]
4. [Dragon's tail ... possibly Favne's]⁴⁶
5. *Sigurd roasts Favne's heart* [also, a tree with birds]
6. *Grane* [Grani] *with the treasure*
7. *Sigurd kills Regin*

Scenes 1–3, on the right jamb, are set in medallions, with number 3 at the top. Sigurðr leans back with his legs bent (as if kneeling in a pit?), holding a shield, with the dragon's triple-ended tongue jabbing at it. The hero's sword reaches up above the medallion and through Fáfnir's neck. The dragon body continues upward from there; we see its curled front leg with talons and the fore-edge of its folded wings, which are otherwise not preserved (Figure 3.5).

Other stave churches contain magnificent “three-dragon” portals, most notably in the Sogn-Valdres region, with winged, two-legged dragons running up the sides, their heads and necks meeting or intertwining in the center, with a small, bird's-eye-view dragon running downward (Hohler 1.37).⁴⁷ Of the confronted dragons, Hohler writes, “All heads are alike in the main features, with strongly rounded skull and short blunt muzzle, preferably with a jaw-roll [lappet] or -lobe and a series of lobes along the snout ridge. Fangs, rows of teeth, ears and mane are elements which may each be omitted” (1.51).

One also finds in these church decorations what Hohler calls “minor dragons,” including some “standing dragons,” which lack wings (e.g., at Vang III, no. 240). They “have the same strong necks and shoulders and the same leg posture as the standing lions, but the hind part of the body changes into a short and thick dragon's tail” (1.42). Fáfnir as depicted at Lardal (no. 123, pl. 2.227) also appears to be a two-legged but wingless dragon. Forms with neither legs nor wings Hohler calls snakes, and they are seen for instance in the early church at Urnes

(eleventh century), for which the Urnes style is named (no. 222). Its famous portal, “entirely different from all the 12th cent. Romanesque works” (2.58), is decorated at



Figure 3.5 Hylestad church portal, Sigurðr slays Fáfnir, detail. Universitets Oldsaksamling, Oslo. Photo Werner Forman Archive.

lower left with “a smooth, greyhound-like creature” recognizable as a lion because of its mane (1.236). Above the lion are three pairs of ribbon-shaped beasts with prominent fore-legs; two are affronted at the top of the portal and anticipate the later “three-dragon” motif. These beasts are in turn “entangled” by snakes. Hohler (2.58)

compares the famous tenth-century Jellinge stone, which has carved on it a lion entangled by a snake.⁴⁸ But given that dragons from that time were conceived of as giant snakes, it may be that in both the Jellinge stone and the Urnes church portal, we see rather a “lion and dragon” motif.⁴⁹

Icelandic Art

Depictions of dragons in Icelandic art are found mostly too late to show a shift from a wingless to a winged dragon, with perhaps one exception (see below). Hence, in the famous carved church door from Valþjófsstaðir, on display in the National Museum of Iceland and dated *ca.* 1200, one sees in the upper roundel (lower half) a knight on horseback rescuing a lion from a dragon, doubtless with reference to the romance motif seen in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Yvain* and in *Þiðreks saga*.⁵⁰ The dragon has two front feet with claws and two angular, feathered wings held above its back in opposing directions, of the sort seen in the Bayeux Tapestry borders.⁵¹ Below this scene on the Valþjófsstaðir door is carved a more decorative roundel of four such dragons interlaced.

Some idea of comparable dragons as they appear in manuscript art can be gleaned from looking through the plates in Halldór Hermannsson’s *Icelandic Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*. Almost all are two-legged and bird-winged, Romanesque (or Gothic) dragons, forming part of decorated initial letters. In MS GKS 3268 4to, p. 4 of the law codex *Jónsbók*, *ca.* 1300, the long tail of a dragon forms the whole outer border; its two legs reach across to form the letter F and also to support St. Óláfr; its neck curls around so its head can menace Óláfr, except that the saint’s scepter is thrust into its mouth. Feathered wings are folded along its back (Halldór Hermannsson pl. 49). In another *Jónsbók* manuscript (fourteenth century), GKS 3269 a 4to, p. 30, a dragon perches on the bowl of an initial thorn (Þ), its bearded and long-eared head biting the ascender, its two legs grasping the bowl, and its wings trailing behind. But this time a man is seated inside the bowl, his knees raised ([Figure 3.6](#)). He holds a buckler in one hand and a sword in the other, pointed straight into the dragon’s armpit (pl. 50b).⁵² A slightly earlier dragon slayer is found depicted in a *Njáls saga* manuscript, AM 133 fol. (*ca.* 1300), f. 14v. Here the bearded, long-eared, feather-winged, two-legged dragon wraps itself

around the left shaft of an initial letter N. A man leans against the right shaft of the N, holding in his right hand a sword that again pierces the dragon's armpit (or legpit; pl. 41a).

Somewhat surprisingly perhaps, one can also find a few dragons (or, rather, their heads) decorating the bottom margins of the otherwise plain manuscript of the Poetic Edda, the Codex Regius (GKS 2365 4to).⁵³ Occasionally, the scribe has to add a bit more text below the bottom line, and this text is set over to the right (they look like catchwords but are in fact part of the text). In two places, the scribe or a contemporary artist (Wimmer, p. x, says it is the scribe) has a little fun with these dropped down phrases by having a dragon head reach up as if to eat them (see f. 16v, f. 35r). For the

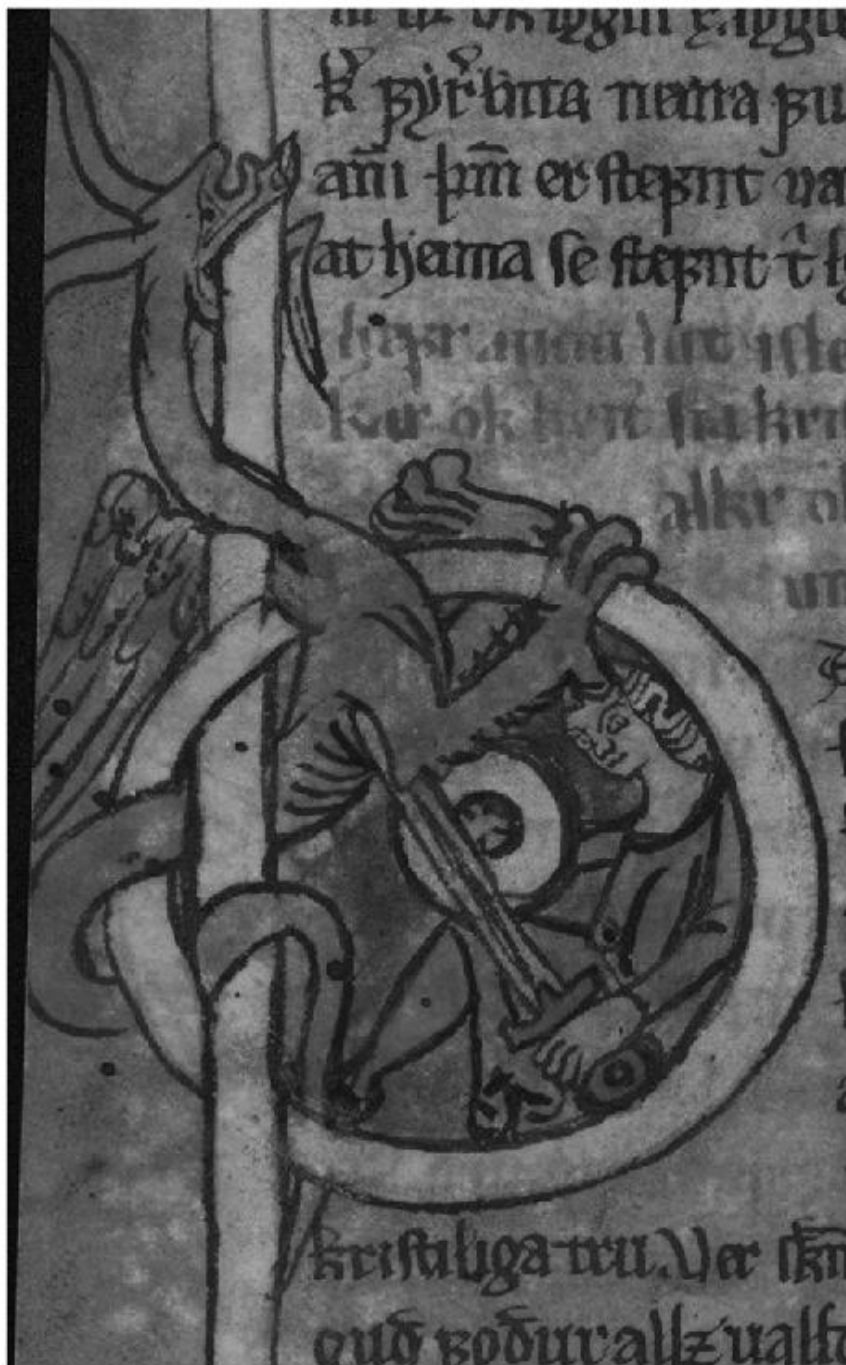


Figure 3.6 GKS 3269 a 4to (Jónsbók), p. 30, initial **D** with dragon and dragon-slayer. The Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík. Photo Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

second of these, the text is describing Sigurðr (the dragon-slayer);

Brynhildr says Sigurðr's eyes were unlike those of Gunnarr (*Skv.* st. 39). In two other places, dragon heads are found in the bottom margin under a full line of text. On f. 17r, a dragon looks up along the angle of a cut bottom leaf; on f. 43v ([Figure 3.7](#)), a cheery little dragon head sticks its tongue out at the right half of the line, "Dauþr varþ inn hunsci," "The Hunnish man died," which Guðrún says about Sigurðr (*Atm.* st. 100). Normally one would like to see the whole body to identify a (manuscript) dragon, but on a comparative basis, I do not think there is any doubt that these are dragon heads. They are drawn from the neck up, with long, swept back, canine (or lupine) ears; a brow ridge; a snout of differing lengths (the one on f. 43v has a blunt snout, making it look a bit like a puppy); and a long, protruding tongue. Two of the heads have a few chin whiskers (f. 16v, f. 35r). Perhaps in these little marginal drolleries, the dragon has its revenge on Sigurðr, devouring his poetic fame.

Stepping back in time to the earliest depiction of an *ormr* in Icelandic art, we find some carved wooden panels that Selma Jónsdóttir identified as part of a Last Judgment scene and that Hörður Ágústsson argued must have originally been in Hólar Cathedral, in the north of Iceland (the panels are now in the National Museum of Iceland in Reykjavík). The panel in question, dated *ca.* 1100, shows the head of a beast devouring (or perhaps disgorging) a human figure ([Figure 3.8](#)).⁵⁴ Its jaws are open and filled with sharp teeth, and it has a long snout ending in a curled nose, an almond-shaped eye (it is seen in profile), swept back ears, a recurved horn, and three chin whiskers. Its long neck loops back into two tight coils, and we can just see the elbow of a figure seated on its back (see Hörður Ágústsson 14–15; Selma Jónsdóttir pls. 1, 39). Based on a comparison with many Last Judgment scenes, Byzantine in origin but found as far north as Gotland,



Figure 3.7 GKS 2365 4to, f. 43v, dragon head, detail. The Árni Magnússon Institute, Reykjavík. Photo Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

Hörður provides a reconstruction of the entire tableau, filling in the scenes between the surviving panels (foldout before p. 63). Satan is shown with the antichrist child on his lap, seated on the nexus of three long, coiled serpentine creatures (the neck and head of a second creature to the left of him and neck of a third are found on a separate panel; see detail, 62). In the mosaic at Torcello, Italy (which Hörður thinks is the closest source model, 162; dated twelfth century), Satan is seated on a throne with lupine heads on either side, connected by a scaly body; they have recurved horns, and human heads and bellies dangle from the toothy jaws of each (Hörður Ágústsson 16; Selma Jónsdóttir pl. 2). Hörður accordingly reconstructs the Icelandic equivalent of this serpentine throne. For the twelfth-century Icelanders contemplating the Hólar Last Judgment, then, they must have dreaded a final fate in the jaws of an *ormr*, or perhaps a *dreki*: either one “is great, and for destruction would suffice.”⁵⁵



Figure 3.8 Wood panel, National Museum of Iceland, doomsday serpent-dragon. National Museum of Iceland, Reykjavík. Photo Werner Forman Archive.

Notes

1. See e.g., the dragon below Satan in the mid-eleventh-century English Tiberius Psalter (British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius C. vi), f. 14 (reproduced in Backhouse, color pl. XX). Icelandic manuscript illustrations are discussed at the end of this chapter.
2. See the facsimile ed. Klein, f. 38r. For the dragon of the apocalypse, the artist adapted a coiled snake by adding bird wings (which the angels also have) and six extra heads along its neck.
3. See the illustration for Psalm 90, facsimile ed. van der Horst. The illustrations for the *dracones* mentioned in *The Wonders of the East* (a text that is found in the *Beowulf* manuscript, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, and also Cotton MS Tiberius B.v., England, ca. 1025) are also drawn as (intertwined) snakes, without wings or feet (see Backhouse color pl. XXXI for the Tiberius illustration, f. 82b).
4. “Draco maior cunctorum serpentium, sive omnium animantium super terram”

- [The dragon is the largest of all serpents, indeed, of all animals on earth], Isidore *Etymologies* 12.4. Classical images, such as a painted vase at the Louvre depicting Cadmus (ca. 350 BC), likewise show *drakones* as large serpents.
5. Cf. da Vinci's own statement in his notebooks: "If therefore you wish to make one of your imaginary animals appear natural—let us suppose it to be a Dragon—take for its head that of a mastiff or setter, for its eyes those of a cat, for its ears those of a porcupine, for its nose that of a greyhound, with the eyebrows of a lion, the temples of an old cock and the neck of a water-tortoise" (891).
 6. See da Vinci's "Study Sheet with Cats and Dragon," ca. 1515, Windsor Castle (repro. Bambach 632).
 7. One can contrast the two-legged dragon in Raphael's 1505 *St. George* at the Louvre, with its dragon balancing on its back coils, to the slightly later version in the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., with its dragon braced on two sturdy back legs while its front paws try to fend off St. George's lance. The dragon in Uccello's 1430–35 *St. George* (Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André; see their website) looks particularly awkward (if somewhat heraldic) as it stumbles forward on two brawny legs, its upraised tail coiled uselessly behind it.
 8. In this passage, "screið" is usually translated as "crept" or "crawled," doubtless with a four-legged dragon in mind. But the verb elsewhere applies to the movement of a snake, the gliding of a ship, and the sliding on ice or skis (see Cleasby and Vigfusson). Andy Orchard's new translation of the Poetic Edda may be the first to use the word "slithered" here (160).
 9. All translations from Old Norse are mine unless otherwise specified.
 10. On the date of the Codex Regius MS of the Poetic Edda, see *Konungsbók*, xlv and lxix n. 6.
 11. Sigurðr's killing of Fáfnir is also related by Snorri in his *Edda*: "Þá gróf Sigurðr gröf á veg Fáfnis ok settisk þar í. En er Fáfnir skreið til vatns ok hann kom yfir gröfna, þá lagði Sigurðr sverðinu í gögnum hann ok var þat hans bani" [Then Sigurðr dug a pit in Fáfnir's path and set himself down in it, and when Fáfnir slithered to the water and went over the pit, Sigurðr thrust the sword through him, and that was his death] (*Skáldskaparmál* ch. 40, ed. Faulkes 46). For other (brief) narratives of the dragon-slaying, cf. *Grípisspá* st. 11: "You alone will slay the shining serpent (*orm*)/ the greedy one who lies on Gnita-heath" and *Fáfnismál* st. 29, in which Reginn says to Sigurðr: "Long you'd have let the old giant/ lie in the heather/ if you'd not used the sword which I myself made/ and your sharp sword-edge." The earliest known description occurs in skaldic verse: St. Óláfr asks Thorfinnr *munr* (d. 1030) to compose a stanza in response to a wall hanging that depicts Sigurðr slaying the dragon (*ormr*); he recites, "The sword reaches even to the back of the mouth. From above, the blood dropped on both edges of the sword. The sword trembled in the snake's breast, the prince prepared the roast" (trans. Duwel 136; see also Margeson 195–196). *Norna-Gests þáttur* (ca. 1300) retells a version of Sigurðr's story, saying that Fáfnir "lay upon Gnita-heath in the form of a serpent (*orms líki*) and was wondrously large in size" (ch. 5). But of the dragon slaying the tale says only, "Then Sigurðr killed Fáfnir and Reginn" (ch. 6, ed. Guðni Jónsson 1.315–1.322). In *Þiðreks saga* (ch. 166), Sigurðr kills Reginn in the form of a serpent-dragon (*linnormr*) by striking it on

the head with a burning log (ed. Guðni Jónsson 1.235).

12. An added difference in the *Völsunga saga* account is that an old man [Óðinn] advises Sigurðr to dig more pits and let the blood run into them (Ger fleiri grafar ok lát þar í renná sveitann, ch. 18). Tolkien (according to his son Christopher) was puzzled by this and concluded “that the original significance of the pit was to enable Sigurd to escape the blast of flame which passed over his head” (208). For Tolkien, the fire-breathing dragon in *Beowulf* so predominated that he could not accept the idea of a Fáfnir that spewed venom only and not fire.
13. See again the Eddic description quoted above, and *Fáfnismál* st. 18 “Eitri ec fnæsta” [Poison I snorted]. I have written on dragons’ other death-dealing properties in a paper titled “Death by Dragons.”
14. See James 466: “One came and announced that the magicians were coming with two crested dragons breathing fire and brimstone.” See further O’Leary.
15. The *Beowulf* dragon likewise breathes real, destructive fire that burns down houses.
16. A similar episode is added to *Erex saga*, the Norse translation of Chrétien’s *Erec et Enide*; see Kalinke 193, 244–245.
17. *Gull-Þóris saga* is edited under the alternate title *Þorskfirðinga saga* by Þórhallur Vilmundarson; see 186–189.
18. Dragon motifs in Old Norse literature are indexed in Boberg and surveyed in Evans. See also Lionarons.
19. On the Sigurðr legend in early Nordic art, see Blindheim; Düwel; Ellis; Margeson; Byock.
20. Thus, Wilson in his introduction to the 1994 reprint of Kermode, p. XX; cf. Margeson 100. On the Jellinge style, see Wilson *Viking Art*, ch. 4. See also Wilson 1970.
21. Other scenes include Sigurðr roasting Fáfnir’s heart, with his finger in his mouth; and Sigurðr’s horse.
22. Contrast the figures with forelimbs, redrawn in Kermode 57 (nos. 14, 15). He terms these “dragon-figures,” but since they are found outside the Sigurðr context, there is no sure way to determine what animal they represent.
23. Ög 136, from the parish of Rök, Östergötland, in southern Sweden. See Jansson 1962, 11–15, with photo of the front side on p. 12. The Rundata site (Samnordisk runtextdatabas) links to photos of the front, back, two sides, and top, all of which have runes carved into them.
24. This kind of layout continues in Danish and Norwegian runestones especially; see for example the photos in Sawyer 8, 94–95.
25. This legendary Theodoric, who figures for instance in the Norse *Þiðreks saga*, is based on the historical Theodoric the Great (454–526), king of the Ostrogoths, and ultimately ruler of the western Roman Empire.
26. Sawyer (2) makes the point that since the inscriptions mention the stone’s sponsor by name, they do not just commemorate the dead but also assert the inheritance claims of the living.

27. For an example of this minimal layout, see the Hobro stone 2 (DR 127) from Jutland, Denmark (Jacobsen and Moltke, photo 2.120 fig. 319; description 1.164–1.165).
28. See e.g. Sö 140 in Brate and Wessén, where the snake runs up one side of the stone and down the other. There are many other types of layouts employed for the rune bands, however (see Thompson 25–26; Sawyer 193), and other designs (such as the “great beast,” and additional intertwining serpents) that complicate the runestone ornamentation.
29. Fuglesang 1998 raises some objections to Gräslund’s chronology, to which Gräslund responds (2006). Sawyer also modifies Gräslund’s date ranges (34). For my purposes, the relative chronology is more important, suggesting that the different artistic styles occurred in a particular order and reflected a particular evolution in the conception of dragons.
30. Gräslund 1991 comments with respect to runestone U 802 (photo p. 121), “The lower jaw and nose-tip have precisely the type of rolled-up ends which appear in the Ringerike style” (English summary, 138). Wilson *Viking Art* sees the Ringerike style particularly in stones depicting the great beast (or Jelling lion), such as one in Norra Åsarp, Västergötland (Vg 181; see his fig. 62, p. 137, and the photo in Sawyer 89) but also in the serpent heads, which the carvers occasionally “turned into a masterpiece” (137; see examples in Wilson fig. 63, p. 138, e.g., Sö 279 [Pr2]; see also Fuglesang 1980, 63).
31. The identification numbers for runestones in the province of Södermanland (abbreviated Sö), south of Uppland (see the map in Sawyer 199), are assigned in Brate and Wessén, which also has one of the best (retouched) photos of the monument (pl. 206). For other photos of the Ramsund stone, see Wilson *Viking Art*, pl. LXIa (LXIb is the Gök stone); Jansson 1962, 52; Fuglesang 1980, pl. 46a (46b is the Gök stone); Hamp. Runestone “style-groupings” (Fp, Pr1, etc.) are assigned in the online Samnordisk runtextdatabas.
32. According to Sawyer (25), 24% of the inscriptions in Uppland and 23% of those in Södermanland are carved on rock faces rather than upright runestones.
33. Physical specifications for the runestones can be found on the Swedish National Heritage Board website, to which one may link from the Samnor-disk runtextdatabas.
34. Wilson *Viking Art* 139 calls this animal a wolf, which seems more likely than the otter suggested by Düwel (137) and others, from a scene much earlier in the legend (*Rm.* introductory prose).
35. Photos of both stones can be seen on Wikipedia, under the article “Sigurd stones.” Photo of U 1163 on Kalle’s website.
36. I thank Constantinos Skordis and Eric Bryan for photographing the relevant plates in Wessén.
37. Photo of U 1031 in Wessén 9.1, pl. 60.
38. Photo of U 1043 in Wessén 9.1; Wikipedia under “Åsmund Kåresson”; Swedish National Heritage Board.
39. Photo of U 1142 in Wessén 9.2, pl. 121.

40. Photo of U 295 in Wessén 7.1; Hamp.
41. Cf. the unmarked, winged dragon paired with an Urnes style runeband creature (Pr4) on runestone U Fv1959;188. Its number indicates it was found and numbered after the Wessén sequence; it is published in Jansson 1959, with a photo on p. 193; photo also Hamp.
42. Photo of U 305 in Wessén 7.1, pl. 3; Hamp.
43. Photo of U 107 in Wessén 6.1, pl. 68; Hamp.
44. Photo of U 887 in Wessén 8.3, pl. 159; Hamp; Kalle.
45. The other churches are at Lardal (Hohler no. 123); Vegusdal (no. 252, lacks the dragon slaying); and Mael (no. 145; of the dragon, “only coils and one leg preserved” [1.194]).
46. I only see Fáfnir’s tail here, so I am not sure what Hohler intends.
47. The head of this center dragon originally descended just below the portal, and so unfortunately in almost all cases it has been snapped off!
48. The Jellinge stone is decorated in Mammen style; see Wilson *Viking Art* 19–21 and pl. XLIX.
49. Hohler 1.58 appears to acknowledge this possibility, saying, “a lion attacked by snakes or dragons is not immediately recognizable as Christian.”
50. See Harris 140, 145.
51. See e.g., the dragons beneath *Ælfgyfa* and William, part 18 in David Wilson’s commentary, p. 178.
52. Evans lists a number of dragon initials in Icelandic law texts, focusing on one that holds a banner saying, “Sem ormuren elskar gullit, svo elskar hinn agiarne rangfeingit fe [As the dragon loves the gold, so loves the greedy ill-gotten goods], from a sixteenth-century MS AM 145 4to (photo p. 466).
53. See the facsimiles ed. Wimmer; *Konungsbók*; and online at “Stafrænt handritasafn.” Outside of the brief remarks in Wimmer, who refers only to “fantastiske dyrefigurer” (p. x), I do not think these dragon heads have been much commented on before.
54. Humans who had been devoured by animals were disgorged at the Last Judgment, but I think the panel means to depict the fate of wicked souls in hell.
55. I paraphrase here Robert Frost’s terse poem “Fire and Ice.” I would like to thank St. John’s College, Oxford, for awarding me a collaborative grant as an Invited Visiting Fellow to work on this chapter, as well as the Mellon Foundation for funding a summer research grant awarded by Saint Louis University. Specialists at the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, especially Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, were helpful in providing manuscript images of dragons.

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Introduction to Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Elegy in Eddic Poetry

Brot af Sigurðarkviðu; Guðrúnarkviða I–III; Helreið

Brynhildar and Oddrúnargrátr

(Fragment of a Poem about Sigurðr; Lays of Guðrún I–III;

Brynhildr's Ride to Hell and Oddrún's Lament)

Critical History

The story of how Sigurðr's death came about, the death of Brynhildr, and the two lamentation poems of Sigurðr's wife Guðrún follow the lacuna in the Codex Regius manuscript (see this volume's introduction). These poems are not quite in chronological order, since the death of Sigurðr has already occurred in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, while the poem that follows in the manuscript, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* actually relates the circumstances of his death. *Helreið Brynhildar*, which follows Brynhildr on her journey into the next world after her suicide, is narrated before *Guðrúnarkviða II*, which then continues Guðrún's history and her unwilling marriage to Atli. *Guðrúnarkviða III*, a brief poem recounting an episode within that marriage in which she is suspected of adultery with Þjóðrekr (Theodoric), and a final poem recounting the unhappy fate of Oddrún, another sister of Brynhildr, who falls in love with Gunnarr after Brynhildr's death completes this section of the Poetic Edda.

Brot (Fragment) is the first poem on the fifth surviving quire of the Codex Regius manuscript, some way into an allusive and sparsely narrated poem that relates the aftermath of Brynhildr's demand that Sigurðr be killed. It begins in mid-conversation, with Högni apparently trying to dissuade Gunnarr from acceding to his wife's

demand. Nevertheless, Gunnarr is resolved on the murder; their younger brother who, according to *Völsunga saga*, was not bound to Sigurðr by oath, is given fortifying and magical foods to give him the strength to take on the task. Sigurðr is murdered in the forest, and while Guðrún weeps, Brynhildr laughs. But later she admits to her husband that Sigurðr had laid a sword between them when they had slept together in her hall after his ride through the flame-wall, and the poem ends on this revelation. *Guðrúnarkviða I*, discussed in detail below by Hill and Sävborg, depicts Guðrún as frozen in grief, unable to articulate her sorrow, while the women of the Gjúkung court try to break her emotional deadlock with their own sad stories. *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (Short Poem about Sigurðr) goes back in time to summarize events at the Gjúkung court before the catastrophe, telling how Brynhildr was driven by her desire for Sigurðr to threaten that she will leave Gunnarr if Sigurðr is not killed. The poem shows the discussion between Gunnarr and Högni, the death of Sigurðr, in bed with his wife, and the aftermath of the killing: Guðrún's grief, Brynhildr's laughter, and her suicide. *Helreið* continues Brynhildr's story; as she rides on the journey to Hel to find Sigurðr, she meets a giantess who accuses her of immorality. The unrepentant Brynhildr counters with a brief life history and reiterates her determination to be reunited with her lover.

The two laments of Guðrún that follow relate how she fled to Denmark after the death of her husband but was persuaded to return to her family and, despite her prophetic misgivings (see Quinn 2009 and Larrington below), agreed to marry Atli. The consequences of that unhappy marriage are foreshadowed in *Guðrúnarkviða III*, which tells how the unhappy wife confides her sorrow in the exiled Þjóðrekr, and they would comfort one another. A jealous concubine, Herkia, accuses Guðrún of adultery, but she is vindicated by judicial ordeal, and the slanderer is punished; in a further chronological dislocation, Guðrún's brothers, murdered by Atli in *Atlakviða*, some way on in the manuscript, are imagined as already dead. *Oddrúnargrátr* continues the theme of female suffering, solidarity, and dis-loyalty. Oddrún, a newly invented sister for Brynhildr and Atli, comes to help her former friend Borgný who is in labor with twins, yet cannot give birth. Though the babies' father is one of the killers of Högni, Oddrún helps deliver them safely, and she laments with the dying Borgný her own grief. She had been intended by her father to wed Gunnarr, while Brynhildr was to lead a shield-maiden's life, but Sigurðr's deceit led to the marriage and suicide of her sister. Oddrún and Gunnarr then became lovers, but Atli

refused to permit their marriage and, as fully related in the following poems about Atli, murdered his sister's lover and his brother. Oddrún's final lines might stand as an epigraph to the death of Sigurðr and its immediate aftermath:

Saztu ok hlýddir, meðan ek sagðak þér
mörg ill um sköp mín ok þeira.
Maðr hvern lifir at munom sínom—
nú er um genginn grátr Oddrúnar.

[You sat and listened while I told you many evil things about my fate and theirs.
Everyone lives by their desires—now the weeping of Oddrún is over.]

Scholarship on these poems from 1955 to 1984 is listed and discussed in Harris 1985. Encyclopedia articles on the poems are found in Strayer and in Pulsiano. The German-language *Kommentar* (von See 2009) discusses all the poems, including their textual transmission, history of criticism, with line by line annotations. Most critical writing about *Brot* and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* has been focused on the difficulty of reconciling the various narratives about the causes of the death of Sigurðr, whether slain in the marital bed, as seems to be the tradition in Old Norse, or murdered while hunting in the forest, as in German tradition, as a prose insert at the end of *Brot* asserts: “enn þýðverscir menn segia svá, at þeir dræpi hann úti í scógi” [And Germans say that they killed him out in the forest]. T. M. Andersson's *The Legend of Brynhild* offers the most thorough-going discussion of the various source problems here, though his hypothetical reconstructions, following Heusler, of the missing poems **Meiri* and **Forna*, have been called into question (Bäumli). Sperberg-McQueen's reading of *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* takes the existence of **Meiri* and **Forna* for granted, but he offers plausible insights into Brynhildr's motivation focusing on the importance of her speech act. “Ultimately she is forced, or forces herself, to face the impossibility of the first clause of her oath (to have Sigurd in her arms), and so she sets about methodically seeing to it that the second clause takes effect, and Sigurd dies. The tragedy is occasioned here not by the revelations of a queens' quarrel, as in the other sources, but by the hasty words of Brynhild, which she can regret, as she does immediately in stanza 7, but which she cannot retract.”

Studies of the lament poems have mainly been concerned with dating them, and the tendency has been to regard their static quality and emotionality as a sign of relative lateness: a position strongly argued against by Daniel Sävborg in the chapter that follows. Lars

Lönnroth's article suggests that the "elegies," in particular *Guðrúnarkviða* I, need be neither recent nor old; rather they combine an ancient form and traditional motifs, updated in line with the tendencies of medieval lyric. Dennis Cronan offers a close reading of *Guðrúnarkviða* II, arguing that Guðrún is caught between the demands of her family and her knowledge, born of experience, of how "the blind pursuit of wealth and prestige leads to treachery and death" (184). *Guðrúnarkviða* III remains a little-studied outlier in the Eddic corpus. Curschmann's article seeks to explain how the close and affectionate relationship between Theodoric of the Goths and Atli's first wife Helche, who in *Þiðreks saga* and German sources came to be recast as an accusation of adultery by a Helche/Herkia, now downgraded to the status of serving-maid and concubine; the *Kommentar* examines in detail the evidence for the unattested word *hrincto* in st. 5, which is crucial to deciding when in Eddic chronology the events of the poem occur (VII 811). Quinn's forthcoming article (2012b) examines how, by juxtaposing Þjóðrekr's loss of his retinue of thirty men with Guðrún's loss of her brothers, her grief at her mistreatment by her husband becomes epic in scale. Quinn also notes how the unfounded accusation of infidelity will recur at the end of the cycle, when Guðrún's daughter Svanhildr is killed as a result of just such a charge, bringing the dynasty to an end. Gísli Sigurðsson's provocative and influential article proposes that the "elegies" were women's poems, composed by anonymous female poets for performance in a female context and engaging with problems of grief and loss, which are chiefly the province of women.

Oddrúnargrátr has been a relatively neglected poem until recently. Quinn's new edition and study (2005, 2009) offer new, detailed perspectives on the poem while Larrington's article on siblings and Quinn's forthcoming articles investigate the lateral relations and kinship networks establishing through the exchange of women in marriage in these poems about Sigurðr and the Gjúkungar. One concentrates on *Helreið Brynhildar*, *Guðrúnarkviða* III, and *Oddrúnargrátr* (2012b); the other (2012a) focuses on *Sigurðarkviða* in *Skamma* and the poems mentioned above, in addition to *Gripisspá*.

In the three chapters that follow, first Daniel Sälvborg ([Chapter 4](#), below) offers a thorough-going re-evaluation of the themes, the form, the likely origins and age of the so-called "elegies," a re-evaluation that encourages the reader to re-think the heroic in other Eddic contexts. Thomas D. Hill ([Chapter 5](#)) investigates the anxiety in *Guðrúnarkviða* I that Guðrún might die of her grief if she cannot

achieve catharsis through public voicing of her anguish. Although the theme of unexpressed grief is unusual in Old Norse, Hill finds parallels elsewhere in medieval European literature. Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir ([Chapter 6](#)) situates Brynhildr's agency and her tragedy in her command of speech acts and describes the verbal strategies used by Eddic heroines to subvert their gender roles.

—Carolyn Larrington

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4

Elegy in Eddic Poetry

Its Origin and Context

Daniel Sävborg

Hamðismál reports Hamðir's last words and describes his death in a struggle against superior forces in these words:

“Vel höfom við vegit, stöndom á val Gotna,
ofan, eggmóðom, sem ernir á qvisti;
góðs höfom tírar fengið, þott scylim nú eða í gær deyia,
qveld lifir maðr ekki eptir qvið norna.”

Þar fell Sörli at salar gafli,
en Hamðir hné at húsbaki. (sts. 30–31)

[“We have fought well, we stand on Goth corpses, weary from the sword-edge like eagles on a branch; we have won great glory if we die now or yesterday, after the norms have given their verdict, no man outlasts the evening.” Then Sörli fell at the end of the hall, and Hamðir sank behind the house.]

Guðrúnarhvöt depicts Guðrún's reaction when her sons have ridden off to battle after predicting that they will die there:

Guðrún grátandi, Giúca dóttir,
gecc hon tregliga á tái sitia,
oc at telia, táruchlýra,
móðug spiöll á margan veg (st. 9)

[Weeping Guðrún, the daughter of Gjúki, went sorrowfully to sit on the threshold and to recount, with tears on her face, grievous stories, many times.]

Both poems belong to the heroic cycle of the Edda, but the two passages make a different impression, and in the scholarly literature, the whole poems have been considered essentially different. In both

quotations, the depicted character experiences something painful, but the depiction of this is very different. In the first case, the speaker exhibits a stoic emotional control; he does not complain at all at his violent death. In the second case, however, the pain is openly expressed through weeping and lament. In the first instance, the central character is an active fighter, in the second a passive mourner.

What is the reason for this difference? For a long time, *Hamðismál* and *Guðrúnarhvöt* were seen by scholars as simply different poems: they were different in character, and differences such as those mentioned were completely natural. But in the early twentieth century, their differences were regarded as fundamental not only between these two poems but between entire groups of Eddic poems. The difference between them was explained by differences in age, mentality, and the essential character of the poem. *Guðrúnarhvöt* came to be classified as belonging to a particular group of Eddic poems, the “elegies,” which were considered to be different as a group from the other poems in the heroic cycle. This view has since been revised and questioned, but it still has supporters and remains, albeit often in less rigid form, the standard picture presented in reference works.

It was Andreas Heusler who in a number of works from the early twentieth century laid the foundation for this view. He presented a general picture of the Edda poems, a “Gesamtbild” (1941, 188), where form, motifs, mentality, and time of composition were brought together. Among the heroic poems, he distinguishes a group of five, which he claims to be Norse representatives of pan-Germanic heroic poetry with roots in the era of the Great Migration: *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Hlöðskviða*, *Völundarkviða*, *Hamðismál*, and *Atlakviða*. He describes them as “doppelseitige Ereignislieder” (double-aspect poems of action), by which he means that they include both narrative passages and dialogue and they revolve around action. He dates them to the early Viking Age (153–154), that is, from the ninth or tenth century. He also dates another group of heroic poems to the Viking Age, “einseitige Ereignislieder” (single-aspect poems of action), which are purely dialogic, yet action-oriented: *Reginismál*, *Fáfnismál*, and *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* (178). Finally, he distinguishes a group that he describes as an “isländische Nachblüte der Heldendichtung” (late Icelandic flowering of heroic poetry), and this group is dated much later: the Christian High Middle Ages (eleventh and twelfth centuries), and they stand out more for “Ausmalen und Begründen der Seelenvorgänge” (causes and elaboration of psychic processes) than for depiction of actions. The group consists of the long narrative

poems *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* and *Atlamál*, but primarily the so-called elegies. This group consists mainly of five “weibliche Rückblickslieder” (retrospective women’s songs), or “Frauenklagen” (women’s complaints): *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, *Oddrúnargrátr*, and *Helreið Brynhildar* (181–188). Based on the formal patterns of these poems, he argues, a number of male retrospective poems were composed, which are found outside the Codex Regius (such as Örvar-Oddr’s death song and Hrókr’s wooing song; Heusler 1941, 185–186). But it is the group of female poems that Heusler is mainly interested in, and these are the poems that later scholarship has discussed as Eddic “elegies.”

Heusler’s primary argument is that these “elegies” are fundamentally different from what he describes as the “old” heroic poems. He speaks of a deep gulf (“tiefe Kluft”) of half a millennium between the groups (188) and generally ascribes to them different structures and literary character. He argues that they also express different mentalities: the spirit of the “elegies” is marked by an era of peace (187) in a Christian culture (Heusler 1906, 252).

Heusler neither argues much for his general model nor for its constituent parts. It is the system itself, the fact that everything—form, content, mentality, and time of composition—is linked together, that should support his view. His general model is formally oriented, and this applies not least to his main contrasts, the five supposedly ancient poems versus the five “elegies”: on the one hand, primarily narrative action-filled poems, and on the other hand, contemplative retrospective utterances with a lot of direct speech. But the reason that these formal features should be the basic criterion for a division of the Eddic poems is not made clear. The vague reference to the supposedly peaceful spirit of the “elegies” is in fact Heusler’s only real dating argument, in this case to the *fríðaröld* (the peace age) of Iceland, that is: in the twelfth century (1941, 187).

Before Heusler, leading Edda scholars had identified neither a separate group of “elegies” nor the relative dating implied by Heusler’s general picture. Some of Heusler’s “elegies” are usually dated early and some of his “old” poems late; when the Eddic poems were categorized, poems from the opposite categories of the Heusler system were grouped together.¹ These scholars also saw distinctive category features, but they were different from those of Heusler. They saw no fundamental gap (“Kluft”) between different groups of the heroic poems, neither in terms of time of composition nor in terms of character (cf. Sävborg 2004, 65–67).

But Heusler's *Gesamtbild* became generally accepted, and since then the idea of a group of "elegies" with both markedly different character and a younger age has been the standard view. Subsequent criticism has mostly been concerned with details and can usually be described as a critique *inside* the system.² There has been a tendency to move the dating of the "elegies" even further forward. While Heusler believed in a dating to the *fríðaröld*, the twelfth century, later scholars, such as Ulrike Sprenger, date them all to the thirteenth century (i.e., just a little older than the manuscript) (e.g., Sprenger 1983, 193).

Heusler's idea of the origin of the elegy group was, however, elaborated with other, more specific hypotheses. For Heusler, the Eddic elegy was a specifically Icelandic creation, and the condition for its emergence he explained vaguely by historical circumstances in Iceland. But in 1938–1939, Wolfgang Mohr published two articles in which he presented a new thesis about the origin of the allegedly younger Eddic poems (Mohr 1938, 1939). He builds on Heusler's system of categories and dating, but according to Mohr, the "elegy layer" ("Elegienschicht" 1939, 150) is not an Icelandic phenomenon. Instead, he argued that these poems are imitations of Danish and Low German rhymed poems. The model is what he calls "das novellistische Spielmannslied" (the novelistic minstrel-song). No examples in this genre have been preserved: it is totally reconstructed by Mohr on the basis of Danish medieval ballads, which he claims were created out of this genre. Ballad is thus a sister genre of the "Eddic elegies." He supports his theory by pointing out similarities between the "Eddic elegies" and Danish ballads (e.g., 1938, 280; 1939, 149). These alleged similarities consist of single words and motifs of all kinds, not just traditional "elegy" features like lament and retrospective focus. Mohr also devotes a long and detailed section to words and motifs related to needlework (1938, 236–237). Mohr's theory became widely accepted in German and English scholarship. His view of the "Eddic elegies" is presented in, for example, Jan de Vries' *Altnordische Literaturgeschichte* (1964–1967), Joseph Harris's overview in Strayer's *Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (1984, 390), and Heinrich Beck's overview in *Kindlers neues Literatur Lexikon* (1992, 667). It should be noted that Mohr's theory conflicts with the results of ballad scholarship. The Nordic ballad genre is much younger than Mohr thought, even younger than the Codex Regius Edda manuscript; nor does it have the German background that Mohr assumed, while the existence of the genre he claims to be the basis of both the ballads and the "Eddic elegies" is entirely rejected by ballad scholars.³

Ulrike Sprenger devoted several works to the “elegies” in the 1980s and 1990s, including the first complete monograph on them, *Die altnordische heroische Elegie*, from 1992. She presents a new general picture of the group, its distinctive character, and its origins. She accepts Heusler’s categorization and relative dating, but she magnifies the contrast he claimed between the “elegies” and other heroic poems even further. The character portrayal of the “elegies” differs fundamentally, she argues, from that of the “old” poems, especially in terms of emotional and moral interest that is lacking in the earlier ones (e.g., Sprenger 1988, 249, 268). Her conclusion is that the “elegies” emerged in the thirteenth century under the direct influence of religious literature. Their distinctive literary character is explained neither by a historical situation (Heusler) nor by impact from another poetic genre (Mohr). According to Sprenger, it originated under the influence of the ideals, spirit, and language found in, for example, homilies, saints’ lives, hymns to the Virgin, and the Bible.

But at the same time, a number of scholars published works that in different ways challenged the traditional image of the “elegies.” Joseph Harris attempted on the basis of Mohr’s theory and dating to broaden the perspective and argued for an Old Germanic background behind the “Eddic elegies.” He is interested less in the existing poems themselves than in the “formal elegy” he detects as a part of them. A number of key elements in the “Eddic elegies” are traced in West Germanic poetry, especially in *Hildebrandslied* and the Old English elegies (Harris 1988). A different perspective was chosen by Gísli Sigurðsson. He adopts modern theories of oral poetry and argues that the Eddic poems should be classified according to their audience. For him the “elegies” are not necessarily manifestations of a different age or a different literary fashion from other Eddic poems, but rather their distinctive character is explained by the fact that they were performed by women for a female audience (1990, 252). My own monograph of 1997, *Sorg och elegi i Eddans hjáltediktning*, further developed some of Joseph Harris’s and Gísli Sigurðsson’s ideas, but it also argued that the sharp distinction between “elegies” and other Eddic poems was unjustified. In an analysis of *Guðrúnarkviða I* from 2005, Lars Lönnroth argued that oral-formulaic theory makes the distinction between young and old poems meaningless and that the “elegies” and their distinctive character combine an Old Germanic legacy with late foreign influences.

A response to several of these critical voices was made in 2005 when Vésteinn Ólason presented a defense of Heusler’s basic division

of a group of Viking-Age “action-oriented poems” and a relatively uniform group of poems dated to about 1200, Heusler’s “Nachblüte” (late flowering) (Vésteinn Ólason 2005, 190). As their main characteristic, he distinguishes an “interest in emotions and inner life,” which he considered to be influenced by Continental courtly poetry (186–187).

Different scholars have focused on different matters when they discuss the characteristics of the “Eddic elegies” and their literary origin. Heusler focuses on form, the retrospective outlook, and the static, almost lyrical character of the “elegies.” Mohr collects an abundance of scattered elements, words, and motifs of different kinds. For Sprenger, a supposed moral character is a key feature, while for Vésteinn Ólason, emotional analysis is the distinguishing feature. Harris’s theory focuses on form once again but also on a number of fixed content-related elements. Gísli argues from the gender of the characters and the motifs linked to the different gender roles.

The focus may be different, but there are still common features. The idea that the “Eddic elegies” are something fundamentally different from other Eddic heroic poems is shared by all these scholars. All but Gísli claim a late dating of the “elegies.”

There are actually several key issues to consider:

- Is it correct to single out a group of “elegies” from the rest of the Eddic poems? This has been taken for granted since Heusler, regardless of the different focus and different views about origin held by other scholars.
- If so, what characterizes the “elegies” as a group, and what is their distinctive character? Here, the scholars discussed above differ significantly.
- What is the explanation of this distinctive character? What origin do the poems have? Scholars have been most concerned with this question, and they have come to different conclusions. But it is also possible that the question is wrong or that it can be answered in a different way in light of recent findings.

It is clear that both Heusler and later scholars who have devoted themselves to the “Eddic elegies” have perceived them as young in relation to the rest of the Eddic poems. When the origin of the group is explained, the late dating is sometimes a precondition. For Mohr, they are by definition “younger” Eddic poems (“jüngere Eddalieder” in the titles of his articles), and this governs his comparisons (Mohr

1938, 1939). Sprenger also presumes a high medieval dating for the “elegies” when she searches for a possible model (e.g., Sprenger 1988, 283). It is therefore necessary to remember that the usual datings of the heroic poems of the Edda are not based on external, such as linguistic, criteria, but on preconceived assumptions about which motifs are young and old, respectively, which mentality is young or old, etc. (see Sävborg 1997, 52–57; 2004, 80–81). This means that dating is an uncertain basis for establishing the origins of the “Eddic elegy.”

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Despite the differences in focus among scholars, it is clear that they all regard grief and lamentation as a characteristic feature of the “elegies.” Even those who focus on formal characteristics describe the poems as lamentation or grief poems (“Frauenklagen,” Heusler 1941, 184), and this also holds true for later scholars such as Sprenger (“Klage” 1988, 270) and Gísli Sigurðsson (“tregrófskvæði” [chain of grief poems] 1986, 127). Grief and open expressions of emotions are very prominent in *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *II*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Oddrúnargrátr*, more so than in most other Eddic poems. Investigation of the “Eddic elegy” as a phenomenon might therefore focus on grief.

Hitherto, scholarship on the “Eddic elegies” has assumed that their distinctive features are fundamentally alien to Norse tradition, violent heroic poetry, and mentality of a feud society. Thus, it has become necessary to look for parallels in later foreign traditions to explain these features as produced by external influences. Mohr, Sprenger, and Vésteinn Ólason propose totally different models, but they agree regarding the characteristics of the “elegies” as something alien to the Eddic-Norse-Germanic context. They base their conclusions on comparative arguments, but they all restrict their comparisons to the late period when they, following Heusler, assume the poems were composed. However, one can also consider the whole issue from another angle, choosing a general and broader comparative perspective and placing the “Eddic elegies” in a larger generic, literary, and social context.

Heroic poetry is an ancient worldwide genre with recurrent features. Western literature traditionally begins with a heroic poem, the *Iliad* (ed. Mazon 1955–6). Like the heroic poetry of the Edda, the *Iliad* revolves around struggles and violence in a relatively “primitive” warrior society. Killing and death are the focus of the narrative, in the

Iliad as in the Edda, and this is characteristic of heroic poetry as a phenomenon. But not only violent acts are depicted in the *Iliad*. After the acts of violence, grief over the dead is often mentioned. This is most notable in song 22 and 24, after Hector's death, and the entire epic ends with the lament of the women at his funeral. Grief and lamentation are fundamental elements of the depiction of struggle and killing in the *Iliad*. European medieval heroic poetry is similar. The Old French *Chanson de Roland* depicts a war adventure, but here, too, grief is a prominent motif. After the long battle scenes, long scenes of grief follow; exceptional warrior ability has a parallel in exceptional lamentation (lines 2414–2932, etc.). Middle High German heroic poetry also revolves around heroic deeds and acts of violence: grief over the dead is a central element (e.g., *Nibelungenlied* (ed. Bartsch 1961) lines 1002–1103, 2377–2379; *Rabenschlacht* lines 1107–1109, 1055–1058; *Diu Klage* (ed. Bartsch 1875)). Grief and lament are elements that seem to belong to heroic poetry as a genre, regardless of time and culture. The violence that the plot revolves around is almost regularly followed by grief over the dead.

West Germanic heroic poetry is closest to Eddic poetry in genre and tradition: they can be seen as sister traditions. Since Old English heroic poetry is written down in the tenth and eleventh centuries, in this context it represents an 'early' period, the period to which the supposedly old Eddic poems exhibiting a harsh, non-emotional and non-elegiac character are dated. Like other heroic poems, *Beowulf* depicts the deeds of heroes, mostly fighting against monsters. But together with the violence, death is also present, and together with death, there is mourning over the dead. The poem begins and concludes with sorrowful funeral scenes. In the final scene, the hero himself is buried after a heroic death, and the grief and lamentation at his funeral are described in detail (lines 3032–3178). Lamentation over the dead resounds through the poem for Grendel's many victims. But of particular interest is the Finnsburh episode, a retelling of a heroic lay within *Beowulf*. It has a typical heroic plot, the treacherous killing of a relative, a temporary reconciliation, and subsequent revenge on the oath-breakers. But the depiction does not focus on the acts of violence but on the grief to which they lead (lines 1075, 1117–1118, 1148–1149, etc.). *Deor* (ed. Krapp 1936) is another poem cataloguing heroic motifs. It consists of a monologue by a sorrowful poet who lists cases of grief and misery from heroic legend to bring consolation in his unhappiness. In this poem, too, lament appears as a natural consequence of the depiction of the main characters and

events of ancient Germanic heroic poetry.

The prominent position of grief in heroic poetry may seem surprising. Depiction of such a relatively static and “weak” emotion as grief may seem to contradict heroic poetry’s focus on killings and violent acts. But it seems to be an essential connection. Nor does it seem to be a pure literary phenomenon; rather it is deeply rooted in the reality of violent societies. Margaret Alexiou has noted, “the dirge is always strongest where the law of vendetta flourishes” (22). The remark is made in a study of role of ritual lament in connection with blood revenge in Archaic Greece, but she stresses that this applies also in contemporary Sicily and the Greek Mani peninsula. There is a strong link between poetry of grief and a society, where feud and blood revenge are central elements.

Skaldic poetry is the sister of Eddic poetry in Norse tradition. It is metrically related to Eddic poetry, composed and transmitted in the same milieu. Skaldic poetry is an important witness to Old Norse poetic tradition, not least because it is more datable and its chronology can be reconstructed. The dominant form is the praise poem, in which princes are praised for their deeds, in both Viking-Age examples and high medieval poems several centuries later. Grief is not a dominant theme in this type of poetry, but it is frequently found there. The grief of the skald and the people over the dead prince is an important element of the praise in, for example, the poems Hallfreðr composes on Óláfr Tryggvason (*Erfidrápa* 5; Skj BI: 151), Sigvatr on Óláfr Helgi (*Erfidrápa* 9, 19, 25; Skj BI: 239–245, lv. 22, 24, 26; Skj BI: 251–252), Erlingr Skjálgrsson (Str 8; Skj BI: 230), and Oddr kíkinaskáld on Magnús inn góði (Str 2 and lv.; Skj BI: 327–328). The last two cases are entirely laments for the dead king. The skald both describes his own grief and chronicles the weeping of the king’s men. Skaldic poetry also has instances of personal grief over dead relatives (cf. Sigvatr [lv. 22; Skj BI: 251] and Egill Skallagrímsson [lv. 10, 13; Skj BI: 44–45]). But most important is Egill Skallagrímsson’s *Sonatorrek*, whose main subject is the skald’s own grief over the death of his sons: a pure lament poem of 25 stanzas in which Egill describes the physical effects of grief, expresses several different emotions, and relates the events that caused his grief (Skj BI: 34–37).

Eddic heroic poetry is thus part of an international genre in which grief and lament over the dead are essential elements. It is composed in a feud society, that is, in a type of society that generally promotes lament poetry. It belongs in the context of Germanic poetry in which grief over the dead is frequently depicted and is prominent in

individual poems. In the Norse poetic context, grief over the dead is a well-known feature. Seen from this perspective, it would be strange if the Eddic heroic poetry did *not* contain grief and lamentation. As it does. Grief is a well-established motif in most of the heroic poems of the Edda, and it is a prominent feature of many: in four of the “elegies,” *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Oddrúnargrátr*, and also in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, *Hamðismál*, and *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*. Grief appears as a natural element, seen in the cultural and social contexts to which the poems belong, and as a natural part the traditional poetic heritage. But that is not how scholars have usually viewed grief in the heroic poems of the Edda. The “Eddic elegies” as a group have been separated out as a secondary phenomenon, as non-genuine heroic poems, primarily because of their focus on grief. Lament has been regarded as a phenomenon alien to the indigenous legacy of heroic tradition. Characteristic is Ulrike Sprenger’s statement: “Generell gesehen ist auch eine Klage im Rahmen eines alten Heldenliedes mit seinem springenden Stil kaum denkbar” [In general within the frame of an old heroic poem with its energetic style, lament is scarcely imaginable] (Sprenger 1992, 53–54). The change comes in a later age, marked by foreign influences: Christian ideals and Christian literature: “Die alte heroische Haltung, die Gefühlsäußerungen ausschloß, wurde nun aufgegeben, und es wurde ein anderes Heldenideal vertreten, wo man frei seine Gefühle äußern, klagen dürfte” [The old heroic attitude, which excluded the expression of feelings, was now abandoned, and another heroic ideal appeared, in which one might freely express one’s feelings, might lament] (1988, 259). Klaus von See takes the same basic view as a criterion for his re-dating of *Hamðismál*. According to him, the absence of “die starre, gefühlsharte Haltung des Heldenpersonals in der älteren Dichtung” [the unyielding, unemotional behaviour of the heroic characters in the older poetry] indicates that the poem is young (von See 1981, 258). Richard Leicher writes about the hero of the old Eddic poetry: “die Kraft ihres Schmerzes setzt sich in Tat um, nicht in Klage” [the strength of their pain is converted into action, not lament] (Leicher 1927, 34). Rose Zeller expresses a similar view: “Ein Verweilen bei der Klage würde von dem alten Dichter als unwichtig und vielleicht sogar als würdelos empfunden worden sein” [Lingering over lamentation was felt by the old poet as unimportant and perhaps even unworthy] (Zeller 1939, 53). This view has often constituted the main criterion for dating the “Eddic elegies.” Gustav Neckel, for example, dates the *Guðrún lays*

with the following argument: “Und nicht bloß stofflich, auch in geist und stimmung geben sie sich als mittelalterliche dichtungen zu erkennen. Weiche gefühle, liebe und trauer, und seelisch verfeinte motive spielen in ihnen eine rolle, die in heidnischer zeit unerhört wäre” [Not only in terms of content, but also in spirit and tone they are recognizably medieval poems. Gentle feelings, love and sorrow, and psychically refined motifs play a role in them which would have been unheard of in pagan times] (Neckel 1908, 234).

This view is generally taken for granted by scholars and is therefore rarely argued for directly. When comparative arguments are used, they are usually put forward *within* Heusler’s model, motivated by contrast with those Eddic poems that Heusler identified as old and are thus perceived as a norm for what is old in Norse tradition (e.g., Sprenger 1988, 283). The argument is not entirely logical, since “elegiac” features in many cases are also found in the poems that Heusler and other scholars perceive as old. *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* and *Völundarkviða* contain lament scenes and depict weeping women (*Brot* sts. 14, 15; *Vkv* sts. 29, 31). In *Hamðismál*, a poem that Heusler and his followers believed to be very old, numerous stanzas depict grief or express lamentation (e.g., sts. 1, 5, 7–9). This should reasonably indicate that the difference between “elegies” and other Eddic heroic poems is not so clear-cut, yet many scholars have not wanted to see it that way, explaining such stanzas as “elegiac” interpolations from a later time (e.g., Gering 1931, 428; Dronke 1969, 182; Sprenger 1983, 185). However, these ad hoc arguments are hardly scientific in their method. They presuppose what should be proved.

But viewed from a truly comparative perspective with literature of a known age and background, the case looks different. This perspective suggests that grief and lamentation over the dead are traditional native motifs in Eddic heroic poetry, and are not alien to indigenous mentality, poetic tradition, or heroic poetry, and thus there is no reason to regard the phenomenon of “Eddic elegies” as originating under foreign influences.

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I have discussed the occurrence of grief as a motif in heroic poetry; now I turn to its depiction. The “Eddic elegy” is a complex literary form. To explain the background and literary context of these poems, it is necessary to look in detail at their treatment of grief. A number of recurrent features in the presentation of grief in the “Eddic elegies”

appear to be typical of these poems as a group.

Weeping is the most common expression of grief in the “Eddic elegies,” occurring in the majority of the heroic poems, even in those that are perceived as old. It is, however, common in poetry from all periods and cultures, in high medieval courtly poetry and religious literature, as well as in West Germanic poems like *Beowulf* or in Viking-Age poetry by skalds like Oddr kíkínaskáld. Of greater interest is the gesture of striking the hands together, *höndum slá*, mentioned in connection with Guðrún’s grief after Sigurðr’s death in three Eddic poems, *Guðrúnarkviða I* st. 1, *Guðrúnarkviða II* st. 11, and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* st. 25. The gesture has in modern times been associated with positive emotions (like applauding), but in the three Eddic cases, it is clearly an expression of grief. The gesture is not found in high medieval continental literature, where grief is rather expressed by *wringing* one’s hands. However, in a work from 1935, Gustav Neckel showed that the hand-striking gesture occurs several times in the ninth-century Old Saxon *Hêliand* (“handun slôg” 2183, etc.; Neckel 1935, 64). Both wording and metrical position are the same as in the two Guðrún lays, thus it must be a common poetic formula. The gesture is not found in the Latin prose model of *Hêliand* but is an addition by the Germanic poet. Quoting Neckel, we can talk about a unique “altgermanische Geste des Schmerzes” (old Germanic grief gesture) (the title of Neckel’s article). There is no doubt that this detail of the depiction of grief in these “elegiac” Eddic poems reflects an indigenous tradition originating in common Germanic tradition, not in late foreign influence.

Guðrúnarkviða I opens with this description:

Ár var, þatz Guðrún gorðiz at deyia,
Er hon sat sorgfull yfir Sigurði. (st. 1)

[It was long ago that Guðrún intended to die, when she sat sorrowful over Sigurðr.]

The verb construction *sitja yfir* recurs in two other Eddic poems depicting Guðrún at the body of the dead Sigurðr: *Guðrúnarkviða II* (“þá er sárla satc yfir Sigurði” [as I sat grieving over Sigurðr] st. 12) and *Hamðismál* (“saztu yfir dauðom / glýia þú né gáðír” [you sat over the dead man / gave no thought to happiness] st. 7). The first two poems are “elegies.” *Hamðismál* has, since Heusler, been regarded as old in contrast to the “elegies,” but here the poems show similarities in depicting grief. This seems to be a formula linked to description of

a mournful vigil over a dead person and thus has attracted the attention of Ulrike Sprenger as her main argument for the origin of the “elegies” in Christian-religious literature. In support of this thesis, she refers to several instances of *sitja yfir* from Icelandic prose, all with religious affiliations (Sprenger 1988, 260). Only one of these instances, however, really describes sitting over a dead person, the late version of *Marte saga ok Marie Magdalene* from the fourteenth century, and this appears to be the only relevant example. The link between the formula “sit over a dead person” and religious-Christian literature is not strong. Sprenger attempts to trace the formula to the Vulgate, where Mary Magdalene is outside Jesus’s empty tomb: “Stabat ad monumentum plorans” [stood at the sepulchre weeping] (John 20:11; Sprenger 1983, 190). But this passage does not refer to *sitting* or to a vigil over a dead body at all. However, the formula is frequently found in connection with mournful vigils over dead people in entirely different literary contexts. It occurs in Icelandic saga prose, in *Heimskringla*’s description of Haraldr hárfagri’s grief at the body of the dead Snæfriðr (*Heimskringla* 126). Ute Schwab has also shown that the formula is well established in lament scenes in German heroic poetry (382): “manec heidnischez wîp, / die sâzen ob den tôten und qualten sêre ir lîp” [many heathen women / they sat over the dead and greatly tormented their bodies] in *Ortnit* (ed. Ame-lung and Jänicke 1968, st. 427). Further cases are found in *Rabenschlacht* (sts. 977, 1129) and *Dietrichs Flucht* (ed. Martin 1967, l. 9903). These appearances in heroic poetry support the argument about the formula’s occurrences in Eddic poetry. And more importantly, Joseph Harris has shown (Harris 1988, 87) that the formula is also found in an Old English heroic poem, *Beowulf*, in the same context of vigil over a dead hero as in the Edda: “Wiglaf siteð / ofer Biowulfe, byre Wihstanes” [Wiglaf, Wih-stan’s son, sits over Beowulf] (ed. Wrenn 1958, lines 2906–2907). Again there is no doubt that we are dealing with an indigenous element in the grief depiction of the “Eddic elegies” ultimately inherited from common Germanic heroic tradition.

The starting point and key topic in the first “elegy” in the Poetic Edda, *Guðrúnarkviða I*, is the heroine’s remarkable inability to express grief, caused by grief itself (see Hill, [Chapter 5](#), this volume). The poem exhaustively and repeatedly describes how Guðrún cannot weep (sts. 1, 2, 5, 11) or perform the traditional grief gesture of striking her hands together (st. 1), nor express her grief in words (st. 23). It is clear that this inability is a consequence of her great grief (e.g., st. 2). The poem depicts attempts to help Guðrún to cry: the first two fail,

while the final attempt is successful. Then she weeps, laments her grief, celebrates the dead Sigurðr, and verbally attacks those responsible for his death. By giving open expression to her grief, she regains her strength. There is a marked parallel to this in Norse poetry. In Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek*, the difficulty of expressing grief is the poem's starting point. "Mjök erum tregt / tungu at hrœra" [It is very grievous to move the tongue] (Skj BI: 34) are the introductory words of the poem, and the first two stanzas revolve entirely around this motif. Here, too, it is made clear that grief causes this difficulty ("ekki veldr" [does not cause]). Later in the poem, there are further parallels to *Guðrúnarkviða I*. *Sonatorrek*, too, depicts how the difficulty of expressing grief is overcome. Gradually Egill expresses his grief more openly, and, like Guðrún, he later attacks those responsible for the grief (sts. 7, 8). At the end, the grief is still there, but the paralysis it caused is gone. It is difficult to determine whether there is a direct influence between the two poems or whether both connect to a common tradition. But it is clear that no poem is closer to the "Eddic elegy" *Guðrúnarkviða I* in structure and main theme than this indigenous skaldic poem.⁴

Little imagery can be clearly linked to grief depiction in the "Eddic elegies." But there is one example in *Guðrúnarhvöt*, in Guðrún's words before she ascends the pyre after having listed the sorrows of her life:

Megi brenna brióst bōlvafult eldr,
... um hiarta þiðni sorgir! (st. 20)

[May fire burn up the breast so full of wrongs, ... may sorrows melt about the heart.]

The frozen breast is a metaphorical description of grief or sorrow ("sorgir"). Metaphors of cold are frequent in depictions of grief, as in *Völundarkviða* (st. 31) in connection with Niðuðr's grief over his sons' death. The late medieval *Skáldhelgarímur* refers to "rygdar iokul" [the ice of grief] (*Rímnasafn* 105). Such metaphors are well known in Old English poetry. In *The Wanderer*, the word "wintercearig" [winter-sorrowful] is used (l. 24), and in *Deor* it is said of Welund: "hæfde him to gesiþþe sorge ond longað, / wintercealde wræce" [sorrow and longing he had as companions / winter cold grief] (4–5). In addition, realistic descriptions of cold, frost, and hail are often symbolically connected with personal grief (cf. *The Wanderer* 2–4, 48–50; *The Seafarer* 8–11). Against this context, Sprenger's attempt to link the metaphors of coldness in the "Eddic elegies" with religious literature

seems implausible. She notes cases where words for ice and frost are connected to shame and envy (Sprenger 1985, 171–172). The argument is unconvincing, since in *Guðrúnarhvöt* it is explicitly said that it is Guðrún's "sorgir" that should melt; there is no connection with the moral defects of Sprenger's religious parallels. A Norse-Germanic context gives a better explanation for a phenomenon in the "Eddic elegies" than later foreign influences.

The depiction of grief in Eddic poetry is not hyperbolic as European high medieval depictions often are. The Eddic poems lack the descriptions of violent collective weeping and fainting in *Chanson de Roland* (ed. Atkinson 1924), the long monologues of lament in *Rabenschlacht*, and the grotesque self-injuring behavior of *Dietrichs Flucht* (see examples in Sävborg 1997, 263). In fact, this is a marked difference between the "Eddic elegy" and the poetry usually identified as its contemporary. The "Eddic elegies" emphasize grief through quantity instead. A recurring technique is to intensify current grief by connecting it with other sorrows, often in a kind of catalogue of grief. When Guðrún in *Guðrúnarhvöt* bursts into tears after her sons' departure to their death, she relates in a monologue all the major sorrows in her life. The starting point is the death of her daughter and her sons, but this grief is intensified in the context of other sorrows. She herself calls it a "tregróf" [a chain of sorrows], and she wishes that it could give comfort to others (st. 21). At the beginning of *Guðrúnarkviða I*, two women, Gjaflaug and Herborg, recount their unhappy lives, listing all the sorrows that have befallen them. Their aim is to release Guðrún from her emotional paralysis, but the two monologues also work to emphasize Guðrún's grief: when later in the poem she begins to lament, this becomes the climax of a series of lament monologues (brilliantly described in Sprenger 1992, 19). The technique of intensifying grief by listing further sorrows is also a characteristic feature in Egill Skallagrímsson's *Sonatorrek*. The starting point is the skald's grief over his son Böðvarr's death, but Egill also mentions the death of his parents, his brother, and his second son. The effect is to suggest that Egill's whole life is full of sorrows, using the same *tregróf* technique as *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Guðrúnarkviða I*. There are also some parallels to this phenomenon outside Norse poetry. Old English *Deor* is basically a monologue in the form of a grief catalogue, where the starting point is the speaker's misery, which he parallels with sorrows from heroic legend. The aim here is less the intensification of grief than consolation, an aim that, however, is also present in *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *Guðrúnarhvöt*. No continental parallels

to this phenomenon have been found. Mohr does note a parallel in a Danish ballad, *Hustrus og Moders Klage* (DgF 286; Mohr 1938, 247), in which two women outbid each other regarding sorrows in life. But since we now know that the ballad genre is much younger than Eddic poetry, this ballad does not solve the problem of the origin of “Eddic elegy” (see e.g., Jonsson 1991, 164–166). The *tregróf* in these Eddic poems seems to have an indigenous background, and it would be reasonable to see the ballad as a part of that Nordic tradition, too.

Drawing conclusions from the terminology of grief is problematic, since the lexis (*sorg*, *harmr*, *gráta*, etc.) is indigenous and present in both older skaldic poetry and in younger works. Yet the terminology has played a role in the discussion of origins. Sprenger shows that the word *sárr* used for emotional pain (in *Ghv*, *Gðr I*, *Gðr II*, and *Sigsk*) is never found in the older skaldic poetry but is common in religious literature (1992, 227–231). But as Joseph Harris has shown, the word is commonly used for emotional pain in both Old Saxon and Old English poetry, including the heroic poem *Beowulf* (1988, 86). Thus, there is an indigenous context for this typical “elegy” word, too. More important is the word *táruhlýra* (with tears on the face), used of the weeping Guðrún in *Guðrúnarhvöt* st. 9 (see the second of the quotes that open this chapter). It is a *hapax legomenon* in Norse literature, but a cognate does occur in the Old English *Genesis: tearighleor* (ed. Krapp 1931, l. 2276), preserved in the tenth-century Junius manuscript. It is unlikely that the poet of *Guðrúnarhvöt* was influenced directly by the Old English poem. We have obviously to do with a specific poetic word for depiction of open grief, a legacy in the oral tradition from a common Germanic concept.

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The *tregróf* sections in *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Guðrúnarkviða I* are retrospective in outlook, one of the aspects that was the basis of Heusler’s distinction of the “elegy” as a group. Heusler argued that this aspect connected these two poems with *Oddrúnargrátr*, *Helreið Brynhildar*, and *Guðrúnarkviða II*, and also with seven poems with male speakers from the *fornaldarsögur* and Saxo’s *Gesta Danorum*. However, the retrospective mode is a diverse phenomenon in these poems, in both function and form.

In *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Guðrúnarkviða I*, the retrospection is integral to, and thus dependent on, the depiction of grief. It can hardly be described as a category-founding feature. Neither of these poems is

solely retrospective. The first is half retrospective, and in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, the retrospective passages occupy a remarkably small space. *Oddrúnargrátr* contains a long retrospection that lists the great sorrows of the speaker's life, the unhappy love affair with Gunnarr, and his death, so in this case, too, a clear relationship exists between retrospection and grief. *Helreið Brynhildar*, however, is an overview of the valkyrie's whole life, in which grief is not prominent. *Guðrúnarkviða II* is a first-person narrative poem that covers a long time. Large parts consist of dialogue, and grief depiction occurs alongside much other narrative material. The retrospective mode is thus of a different kind than in *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Guðrúnarkviða I*. The male-voiced poems mentioned by Heusler are retrospective monologues, pure catalogues of warrior deeds, such as Örvar-Oddr's death song, Hrókr's wooing song, and two Latin poems spoken by Starkaðr in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*. *Víkarbálkr* and Hildibrandr's death song have a more tragic tone, but none of them openly expresses grief. Neither in form nor function do these poems have any similarities with *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Guðrúnarkviða I*. In Hjálmar's death song, the dying hero establishes an elegiac contrast between his death and his former happy life at the Swedish royal court with the king's daughter. Although he expresses grief, no literary similarities are found between this depiction and the ones in the *Guðrún* lays.

In form and function, the retrospections summarized above are completely different phenomena in different Eddic poems; thus, Heusler's categorization rests on shaky ground. The focus on retrospection is just one manifestation of Heusler's markedly form-oriented view of Eddic poetry, its chronology, and its Old Germanic context. He argued that Germanic heroic poetry developed from a "doppelseitiges Ereignislied" (double-aspect action poem), with a larger amount of narrative verse and a smaller amount of direct speech, to a "situation-oriented" type of poetry, with monologue and dialogue as the dominant elements. Yet the West Germanic heroic poems preserved hardly support this idea. *Hildebrandslied* contains 69% direct speech and the *Waldere* fragments contain 94% (Heusler 1902, 195), and both poems are in their extant form distinctly situation-oriented. Heusler's model presupposes that Eddic poems like *Atlakviða* represent the most original form and thus presupposes what should be proved (cf. Sävborg 2004, 61–64).

The retrospective lament poems preserved in Old English have also been called "elegies," and in recent years a possible connection with the Eddic "elegies" has been suggested. In several studies, Joseph

Harris has claimed a generic link between the two traditions, a thesis that would strengthen the theory of an Old Germanic context behind the “Eddic elegies” and their distinctive character (Harris 1988). But even if a vague similarity exists between *Deor* and a few of the Eddic “elegies” regarding the *tregróf* technique, the differences are more apparent. The female-voiced elegies *Wulf and Eadwacer* and *Wife’s Lament* describe a longing for a man from whom the woman is separated, and the happy past is contrasted with the sad present. The monologues are lyrical, detached from all narrative context. This is markedly different from the Eddic “elegies.” There the narrative poems occur in a larger context of narrative heroic poetry, and the laments concern specific events in heroic legend: grief over dead men. This is a kind of grief, as we have seen, which is characteristic of heroic poetry in general, and it is rather in this context the “Eddic elegies” and their grief should be placed. The other Old English elegies, like *The Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, *Ruin*, *Resignation*, and *Rhyming Poem*, differ even more from the Eddic poems. The epic context is absent here, too, and their purely lyrical character is even more pronounced. The grief is produced by longing within exile, but the poems also express sorrow over the world’s vanity and transitoriness (*The Seafarer*). This is philosophically reflective poetry, not heroic engagement with death and grief for the fallen. As Germanic alliterative poems, they of course have an ultimate common origin, but it is difficult to see a closer relationship between Old English and Eddic “elegies” on the basis of “elegiac” peculiarities.

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Guðrúnarhvöt does not begin with Guðrún’s lament or with any depiction of grief. It begins with a whetting scene. Svanhildr is dead, and Guðrún incites her sons with harsh words to avenge their sister’s death:

er harðhuguð hvatti at vígi
grimmom orðom Guðrún sono. (st. 1)

[The fierce-spirited Guðrún whetted for the fight, with grim words, her sons.]

Guðrún continues by implying that her sons are cowards, and she contrasts this to her brothers’ courage and fierceness. First the sons are reluctant, but then they capitulate. Laughing, Guðrún chooses helmets and mail-coats for her sons. Only after their departure does she burst into tears.

When in *Guðrúnarkviða II* Guðrún receives the message about Sigurðr's death, she responds with a vengeful verbal attack against the killer, Högni: "þitt scyli hiarta hrafnar slíta" [may the ravens tear out your heart] (st. 9). *Guðrúnarkviða I* is dominated by Guðrún's grief. When she is finally able to express it, she laments openly, but in stanza 21, she also curses the murderers and predicts the killing of Gunnarr. Such features have puzzled many of the scholars of the Heuslerian school. Vengefulness and fierce heroism have been linked to the "old" Eddic poems contrasted to the "Eddic elegies." So, for example, Franz Rolf Schröder argued that the whole whetting scene in *Guðrúnarhvöt* was an interpolation from an old poem, arguing that a whetting did not belong in a young, grief-focused poem (Schröder 434). Sprenger claims similarly that stanza 21 of *Guðrúnarkviða I*, where Guðrún curses Gunnarr, is an interpolation of an old "doppelseitiges Ereignislied" [double-aspect action poem] arguing that such a stanza would be strange in a poem devoted to Guðrún's grief (Sprenger 1992, 6).

These arguments clearly illustrate the Heuslerian view about the special character of the "Eddic elegies" and the distinction between them and the other, apparently older Eddic poems. Heusler himself connected the spirit of the "elegies" with Iceland's *friðaröld* ("age of peace"; Heusler 1941, 187), and he claimed that "young" and "old" Eddic poems evaluated the events of heroic legend fundamentally differently: "Der vorkirchliche Geist b e j a h t diese Welt der Untaten" [the pre-Christian spirit *valued positively* this world of wicked deeds] (1906, 252). Jónas Kristjánsson sees in the "young" Eddic poems "the influence of Christianity and its message of mercy and love" (Jonas Kristjánsson 1988, 64). Sprenger generally supposes a connection between the emotional orientation of the "elegies" and their supposed rejection of the old heroism (e.g., Sprenger 1985, 967).

But Guðrún's words and acts in these three "elegies" are not pacifistic. Moreover, her curse of Gunnarr in *Guðrúnarkviða I* occurs in the stanza immediately following her lamentation and hard-won tears, and her desire for revenge in *Guðrúnarkviða II* is articulated in the same stanza in which she mentions her grief (her *harmar*). The vengeance-whetting in *Guðrúnarhvöt* is introduced by a stanza relating Guðrún's grief, and after the whetting, her detailed lament monologue follows. Grief and vengefulness do not seem to be opposite phenomena in the "Eddic elegies." This also applies to other Eddic poems. In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, Sváva reacts, in the same stanza, with both lamentation and a vengeful outburst when she receives

news of the death of Helgi (st. 38). In *Hamðismál*, the introductory stanza 2 explains that Guðrún whetted her sons to revenge, but when she does speak, she laments her lack of joy and her sorrows (sts. 5, etc.). The last example is discussed by Carol Clover, who claims it shows that Guðrún's lament was an implicit incitement to revenge; her sons also interpret her words thus (Clover 1986, 161). She concludes, "the apparent confusion in *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál* between incitement and lament is not accidental, the result of a redactorial botch, but organic" (162).

Clover's thesis has good support in Germanic material. Whetting and lament, vengeance and grief, are not contradictory phenomena; rather they are complementary in Eddic heroic poetry. The link appears to be almost generic. Revenge and grief are also closely related in Old French and Middle High German heroic poetry. After a description of violent grief reactions in *Chanson de Roland* (e.g., 2414–2422), this request follows: "Car chevalchiez, vengiez ceste dolor!" [To horse! avenge this sorrow] (2428). A mighty battle follows. Lamentation over the dead is a means of incitement to vengeance. As previously mentioned, the dirge is strongest in cultures where the law of blood-vengeance prevails. In the *Iliad*, Achilles's immoderate grief goads him to his greatest feat, the slaying of Hector. Scenes of lament and heroic deeds follow one another in *Beowulf*. From this perspective, there is nothing strange about the presence of whetting and the vengeful outbursts in the "elegies" or about the elements of grief in other Eddic poems. In this regard, there is no difference between them. Neither the "elegies" nor the other Eddic poems are peaceful works but rather martial, heroic poems.

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The Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf* is of great importance for the understanding of Germanic heroic poetry. It is, of course, only an episode within the larger epic, but what is described is a performance of a short poem about an episode from heroic legend. The poem performed in the Danish hall is thus, with regard to its length and scope, more comparable to the Eddic heroic poetry than is *Beowulf* as a whole with its epic length and myriad events. Although the Finnsburh episode is a summary of a lay, perhaps part of a larger epic cycle, and not the poem itself, it probably gives information about the theme and focus of this poem.

The summary of the poem about the aftermath of the battle at

Finnsburh begins with these words:

Ne huru Hildeburh herian þorfte
Eotena treowe; unsynnum wearð
beloren leofum æt þam *lind*-plegan
bearnum ond broðrum; hie on gebyrd hruron
gare wunde; þæt wæs geomuru ides.
Nalles holinga Hocæs dohtor
meotodsceaft bemearn. (v. 1071–1077)

[Nor indeed did Hildeburh need to praise the faith of the Jutes; guiltlessly she was bereft of dear ones, brothers and sons at the battle; they fell in succession, wounded with spears; that was a mournful lady. Not without cause Hoc's daughter bewailed fate.]

After this section on mourning, there is a brief explanation of the background to the fight that gave rise to the grief. Grief continues to be a prominent theme. Hildeburh laments over her slain son and brother (1117–1118), and two men's grief over the events is also portrayed (1149). Throughout the episode, grief for slain family members occupies considerably more space than the battles that caused their death. The central acts of violence in the poem are alluded to through the grief they cause the main female character.

Not only is it remarkable that grief should dominate the representation of a story about killing and revenge, it is also noteworthy that the focus of this whole violent episode from heroic legend is on a woman. For it is Hildeburh who is the central character in the depiction of the events in the episode, it is with her that the summarized poem begins, and she is the one who dominates the rest. She does not dominate through direct actions but as a grieving person, a mourner.

This problematizes the views of several Edda scholars. For those who accept the Heuslerian model, the focus on static scenes of mourning is a late and foreign phenomenon contrary to the focus on action in the “old” heroic poems (typical comments are e.g., Turville-Petre 1972, 132–133; Holtsmark 1957, 153). For many, the focus on women in Eddic poems is a late influence (e.g., de Vries 1964, 302). But as is shown by the Finnsburh episode in *Beowulf*, these phenomena are neither recent nor foreign in Germanic heroic poetry. The tendency we see in the Finnsburh episode is the same as we see in the “Eddic elegies” *Guðrúnarkviða I*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, and *Guðrúnarhvöt*, where the central acts of violence, the killing of Sigurðr and Svanhildr, are represented through the grief they cause the central female character, Guðrún.

In the Finnsburh episode, the violence causes misery for several of the poem's characters, and in one case, this is also mentioned (1149). But the principal mourner is a woman. Women do not appear often in *Beowulf*, but when they do, their role is typically, as in Hildeburh's case, that of mourner. At the end of *Beowulf*, a woman appears at the mourning ceremony after Beowulf's death. The section also describes collective male grief in general terms, but elaborated, individual, and verbalized grief is indicated only by this anonymous woman, whose sole function in the poem is to mourn (3150–3155). The tendency is the same in the three Guðrún "elegies" mentioned. The killings in the poems must have distressed many people, and some men also seem sad, but it is the woman, Guðrún, who is the main mourner.

The similarities between these "Eddic elegies" and the Finnsburh episode are remarkable. A woman is placed at the center of the narrative, although the episode in heroic legend revolves around acts of violence between men. But these acts of violence are primarily portrayed through the woman's grief, and thus the narrative is focalized through the woman. This focus is one of the most characteristic features of "Eddic elegies" as a group, and it is one of the features that has been regarded as most significantly different from the "old" Eddic poetry. But the Finnsburh episode shows that there is no reason to see this as a foreign feature. This, too, belongs to the context of indigenous Germanic heroic poetry.

The focus precisely on a woman in a story depicted primarily through grief is significant for the understanding of "Eddic elegy" as a possibly distinct phenomenon. This feature really does distinguish the "elegies" from other Eddic heroic poems. In two articles, Gísli Sigurðsson has presented a view of the Eddic poems where he focuses on the main characters' gender as crucial to understanding the poems as a whole. Gísli's starting point is modern theories of oral poetry, and his aim is to classify Eddic poetry by its audience during oral transmission. The same episodes from heroic legend would have been mediated in totally different forms at the performances for female and male audiences, respectively. Following Parry and Lord, he believes that Eddic poetry as oral poetry was re-created at every performance, so it is not meaningful to split the poems into old and recent works. He accepts the Heuslerian division into two basic groups of Eddic heroic poems, but for him, they are not old versus young but rather "male-orientated poems" versus "female-orientated" (Gísli Sigurðsson 1990, 252). He believes the two groups to be fundamentally different.

It is not necessary to accept everything in Gísli's theory. His strict

Parry-Lord view on the non-memorized character of oral poetry has not received strong support by other researchers. Nor do the poems in the two designated groups seem as profoundly different as Gísli, like Heusler, argues. The theory that the differences between the poems might have derived from different audiences has no support in the sources; the only medieval description of an actual oral performance of an “Eddic elegy,” *Norna-Gests þáttur* (ed. Guðni Jónsson 1.326), describes a male audience. But the idea that the poems Heusler identified as “elegies” really do have something in common—their focus on women—appears to be basically correct. Here Gísli Sigurðsson seems to have come close to a very important conclusion.

Guðrúnarhvöt and *Hamðismál* depict the same episode from heroic legend, the events following Svanhildr’s death. Moreover, in their opening sections, they depict the same scene: Guðrún’s whetting. In both poems, grief occurs in this scene. Both poems show Guðrún lamenting openly (*Hm* 4–5; *Ghv* 11, 16–17, 20); she is associated with weeping in both (*Hm* 8–10; *Ghv* 9); both emphasize her grief in the present as well as the past (*Hm* 5, 8, 10; *Ghv* 1, 5, 8), and both problematize her emotions over her murder of her own children (*Hm* 8; *Ghv* 5). But Guðrún is the only character who laments openly, and this is also common to both poems. Her sons, the men in the two poems, have lost their sister and are aware of their imminent death, but they neither lament nor show open grief in either poem. On the contrary, their belligerence is marked in both poems (*Hm* 11, 16; *Ghv* 6) as well as their hard, stoic attitude toward death (*Hm* 10–11; *Ghv* 6–8). There is no difference between the two poems in the general reaction to tragic events or in the expression of grief; rather the difference is found *within* the poems, between men and women. The woman is “elegiac,” a mourner, in the “old” *Hamðismál*, and the men are terse and stoic in a supposedly “old” way in the “elegy” *Guðrúnarhvöt*. Scholars of the Heuslerian school generally believe that the characters in heroic legend were re-shaped, “umgestaltet,” in the “elegies” in contrast to the “old” Eddic poems. Sprenger has repeatedly referred to an “Umgestaltung heroischer Figuren” [reshaping of heroic figures] (the title of Sprenger 1985a) and has argued that the “old” poetry portrays these characters as avengers who never mourn, while the “elegies” depict them as grieving and lamenting (Sprenger 1988, 245–247, 259; 1992, 224). She identifies representatives of the two supposedly contrasting types of poems. Typical of the heroic figure of the “old” poems is Hamðir (Sprenger 1988, 246) while the typical figure of the so-called young “elegies” is

Guðrún in *Guðrúnarhvöt* (247, 258, etc.). The same view is found among several other scholars (e.g., Heusler 1934, 12; von See 1981, 258; Dahlstedt 1962, 31, 34, 39; Andersson 1988, 293). But the shared scene in *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál* contradicts this view. The Guðrún character has not been “umgestaltet” [reshaped], and neither has Hamðir nor Sörli. That *Hamðismál* is experienced as emotionally harsher and more heroic and *Guðrúnarhvöt* as more emotional is because, after the departure of Hamðir and Sörli, *Hamðismál* chooses to follow the men while *Guðrúnarhvöt* stays with the woman. In these continuations, men and woman maintain the same roles as in the first scene, but the one-sided focus on the men in *Hamðismál*’s continuation and on the woman in *Guðrúnarhvöt*’s continuation colors our reading of the poem. Thus, one appears to be harsh-heroic and the other emotional-elegiac, a difference resulting from the focus on men and a woman, respectively. *Hamðismál* shows how a woman who is prominent in a supposedly old Eddic poem is associated with grief and lament there too, exactly as in the “elegies.” In the same way, *Guðrúnarhvöt* is an “elegy” that is not *generally* more focused on the characters’ emotions.

Gender differentiation is also evident in *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, another of Heusler’s “old” Eddic poems. Sigurðr’s death affects both men and women in the poems, but the only one who laments openly and even weeps is a woman, Brynhildr (sts. 14, 15). Certainly there are cases where women in the Edda are active and personally commit acts of violence, but they are exceptions. These events occur in heroic legend and are mentioned in both “elegies” and “old” poems (Guðrún’s slaying of Atli and her sons are mentioned in *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarkviða II*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, and *Hamðismál*; i.e. two “old” poems and four “young” ones). Certainly there is also evidence of female emotional harshness in the “old” group (as we would expect from Heusler’s and Sprenger’s arguments); there is, however, only one real case, *Atlakviða*, and it is a rare exception. The usual and primary role of the woman is that of mourner, in all Eddic heroic poems, and in both Eddic and Old English heroic poetry.

That brings us close to a possible solution to the problem of the distinctive character of the “Eddic elegies.” They are not fundamentally different from the other Eddic poems. There is no reason to regard them as belonging to a different tradition or to ascribe to them a different origin or literary context. They do have a partially distinctive character within the group of Eddic poetry by

virtue of their greater focus on grief and emotions, but this does not in itself seem to be a feature that constitutes a subgenre, as it is secondary to their focus on women. That is what distinguishes the “Eddic elegies,” and to some extent it makes them a separate group within the category of Eddic heroic poetry. “Eddic elegies” depict the violent events of heroic legend by focusing on the women who were affected by them. This takes place in an indigenous Norse-Germanic heroic tradition.

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The twentieth century gave us a new understanding of oral poetry. The new knowledge problematizes the traditional philological view of the Eddic poems as composed in a fixed form at a certain moment and then memorized until the time they were written down. Hardly any scholars would claim today that we have access to or can reconstruct an original version of an Eddic poem. This is important for assessing the age and date of the Eddic poems and what *can* be dated. Gísli Sigurðsson has argued from Parry’s and Lord’s Oral Formulaic theory that there are no “young” or “old” Eddic poems. Although not everyone has accepted that the Parry-Lord theory is fully applicable to Norse poetry, it has influenced Old Norse scholarship in general. Most scholars accept that the oral Eddic poems have a fundamentally more unstable character than later written poetry. Eddic poems that originated as oral compositions during the Viking Age must necessarily have changed significantly during the centuries of transmission through large numbers of singers.

Lars Lönnroth has argued for such an origin of the perhaps most characteristic “Eddic elegy” of all, *Guðrúnarkviða I*. He accepts the arguments presented by Joseph Harris and by me for elegy as an essentially old phenomenon in Norse poetry. Formulas such as “sit over a dead person” and “strike the hands together” bear witness, he argues, to an old Germanic tradition of grief poetry. But he thinks that through the centuries, the old Eddic poem incorporated new features, from later times and foreign literary traditions. He accepts some of Sprenger’s parallels in religious literature and also suggests borrowings from courtly poetry (Lönnroth 2001, 116–119). For him, *Guðrúnarkviða I* is not young or old: “It is neither or both” (Lönnroth 125).

Generally, it is a reasonable approach to regard Eddic poems, in their character of oral poems, as so open to re-shaping that much must

have been added since the poem was first composed. Thus, the evidential value of individual elements as a means for determining the age and origin is significantly reduced. However, it is not impossible that the Eddic poems had a more stable shape than Lönnroth, following Parry and Lord, believes, even if they were open to re-shaping during transmission. This makes it tempting to try to re-date the “Eddic elegies,” since so many of the arguments put forward for their late date were proved problematic or unsustainable. But the uncertainties are so great that such an attempt does not seem necessary. The fact that the poems are based primarily on indigenous tradition can, of course, entail that they themselves are old, but the genre they belong to could also be relatively stable and productive over a long period. Skaldic court poetry is an example of that. This type of poetry survived relatively unchanged for four hundred years, and similarly the individual “Eddic elegies” might have been composed late but within a conservative tradition (cf. Sävborg 1997, 452–453). Yet the uncertainty of dating the “elegies” applies equally to Eddic poetry in general, and thus also to the poems traditionally regarded as old. Perhaps it is most reasonable to conclude that the heroic poems of the Edda, both “elegies” and others, have a long history, but that they were composed over a long period and underwent several changes during oral transmission.

The issue of dating is not as crucial as Heusler and his followers contended; in this I think Gísli Sigurðsson is right. The important thing is that the fundamental characteristics of the “Eddic elegies” are part of an indigenous tradition and do not differ essentially from other Eddic poems. They are not a foreign phenomenon in Norse literature or Germanic heroic poetry.

Notes

1. E.g., Grimm 1829, 4, 12, 365–355; Ettmüller 1847, 74; Jessen 1871, 40, 50, 60; Mogk 1904, 639, 643, 646, 656; Edzardi 1878, 337; Vigfusson and York Powell 1883, 168, 306, 348; Finnur Jónsson 1920, 67.
2. One case is when Klaus von See, *contra* Heusler, attempts to move *Hamðismál* from the group of “old” poems to the youngest layer (de Vries 1981, 258, etc.). But his argument for this is entirely Heuslerian: he claims that *Hamðismál* has a peaceful and emotionally open character and thus differs from the tone that, according to Heusler, characterizes the old Eddic poems.

3. Cf. e.g., Jonsson 1991a, 155, 164–166, etc. For critical analyses of Mohr, see Sävborg 1997, 440–444; 2000, 60–61; Vésteinn Ólason 2005, 178–183.
4. The similarities in the depiction of emotion in *Sonatorrek* and the “Eddic elegies” are generally remarkable. One of the most famous and distinctive features of the “Eddic elegies” is their sensibility, “Innerlichkeit” in Heusler’s words (1941, 183). The emotional complexity they depict and their “long speeches highlighting the psychological reactions of the characters” have been identified as traits that can only be explained by influence from high medieval continental literature (Vésteinn Ólason 2005, 187). But all of this is characteristic also of Egill’s indigenous Viking-Age poem.

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Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta

Guðrún's Healing Tears

Thomas D. Hill

Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta focuses on what might seem an awkward moment in the narrative of the Völsung cycle. After the death of the supreme hero Sigurðr, one might expect that his young wife would die of grief. In the *Chanson de Roland*, for example, Roland's fiancée, La bele Aude, fainted and then died at the news of the death of her intended, and Roland and Aude were not even married yet. Surely Guðrún grieved no less for Sigurðr than Aude did for Roland, so how could she have survived the news of the death of Sigurðr and her knowledge of her brothers' involvement in the death of her husband? Yet the logic of the two-part tragedy of the Völsung cycle—of this portion of it at least—requires that Guðrún survive and marry Atli the Hun. To some degree, the poem is simply an explanation of why and how Guðrún survived the death of her first husband and came to play a role in the next act of the Völsung story. At the same time, *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* is a humane poem about grief and the beginning of recovery, about dealing with sorrow and its consequences, and about the necessity of expressing grief, both in tears and speech in order to be able to move on in one's life. In this chapter, I would like to explore the psychology and physiology implicit in the poem and to suggest some medieval analogues for one of the themes in *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, the belief that tears can heal, or at least begin the process of healing, and that the alternative, the stony silence that devastating grief can cause, is potentially life threatening.

In the opening of the poem, the poet speaks of Guðrún making

ready to die—but by the end of the poem, it is Brynhildr not Guðrún who makes ready to die, while Guðrún leaves the court of her brothers and goes into the wilderness and then from the wilderness to Denmark to begin a time of grieving and healing. The poem as we have it is thus about a process of healing, of how the woman who had married the most glorious hero in the northern world could come to marry again and live out the rest of an eventful life.

The first lines of the poem set the scene for the first part of the poem, and the details we are given are all charged with meaning.

Ár var, þaz Guðrún
gorðisk at deyja,
er hon sat sorgfull
yfir Sigurði. (st. 1)¹

[It was of old that Gudrun set out to die when she sat sorrowful, over the body of Sigurðr.]

The opening words of the poem recall the beginning stanzas of *Völuspá* and *Hymiskviða*: *Ár var* [it was of old]. The poem unfolds in mythic time. And the first thing that we are told is that “Guðrún / gorðisk at deyja” [Guðrún made ready to die]. She is “sitting over” the body of Sigurðr, an early example of the Germanic (and Celtic) practice of waking the dead, and she expects to die herself either as a suicide or simply from the burden of grief that she endures. Indeed, the death of Sigurðr would appear to demand such a sacrifice, and since Guðrún does not have the power to avenge him (yet), her death would seem appropriate and necessary.

Wise men, however, are concerned about Guðrún’s determination to die, and they attempt to console her—yet Guðrún might not weep.

Þeygi Guðrún
gráta mátti;
svá var hon móðug
at mög dauðan
ok harðhuguð
of hrer fylkis. (st. 5)

[Yet Guðrún might not weep, she was so troubled at the death of her husband, and grieved at the fall of the prince.]

Then two women attempt to console Guðrún by telling of their losses and their various sufferings, which include the loss of husbands, children, and other kin—and in the case of Herborg the queen of the Huns, the humiliation of enslavement and forced if apparently not

wholly unpleasant concubinage. Yet Guðrún is unmoved at the account of these sufferings, and twice more the half-stanza about how Guðrún could not weep is repeated (cf. *Gkv II* st. 11; *Am* st. 39).

Three times consolation has been offered and three times it has been refused, and at this point in the trajectory of the poem, it would appear that Guðrún is resolute and unmoving in her commitment to death. But at this juncture, an otherwise unknown sister of Guðrún, Gullrönd, intervenes, reproaches the other comforters, and in a dramatic and striking gesture rips the sheet from the body of Sigurðr and invites Guðrún to kiss the lips of the corpse of her beloved. At this point, faced with the sheer materiality of the dead body of her beloved, Guðrún's reserve breaks down, and she reddens (always a sign of strong emotion in Old Norse-Icelandic literature) and weeps as if rain were falling. She then utters one of the most beautiful laments in the corpus of early Germanic literature—five stanzas in which she celebrates the beauty and glory of her lost love and in which she curses the treachery of her brothers and the evil of that *armr vaett* “wretched creature” Brynhildr.

One could imagine that the poem might be complete at this point. Guðrún has been consoled or at least has been brought to the point of articulating her grief and the glorious dead hero has been celebrated, but in a totally unexpected and somewhat unrealistic way, Brynhildr herself intervenes. As the woman who was certainly the *ráðbana* “death-contriver” of the dead hero, Brynhildr would hardly be welcome at Sigurðr's wake—Guðrún's brothers are discreetly absent—so her presence is both unexpected and unexplained. And both the character and violence of her sudden intervention seem puzzling.

Þá qvað þat Brynhildr
Buðla dóttir:
“Vön sé sú vættir
vers ok barna,
er þic, Guðrún,
gráz um beiddi
ok þér í morgun
málrúnar gaf.” (st. 23)

[Then spoke Brynhild, the daughter of Buðli, “May that witch be deprived of husband and children who made you weep and gave you the mystery of speech in the morning.”]

Brynhildr hates Guðrún as her rival for the love of Sigurðr, but she does not curse Guðrún and instead curses Gullrönd, whose violent action of stripping away Sigurðr's shroud has precipitated Guðrún's

tears and her lament. And she curses Gullrönd specifically because she was the occasion of Guðrún's tears and of her speech. From the point of view of the modern (casual) reader, at least, one might imagine that Brynhildr would take pleasure in watching a hated rival weep. Yet her response is utterly unexpected—she is furious at Guðrún's tears—and she curses not Guðrún but Gullrönd.

And after the exchange between Brynhildr and Gullrönd, the trajectory of the poem changes. Brynhildr, not Guðrún, prepares to die as part of Sigurðr's obsequies. Fire flames from her eyes, and she breathes out poison as she looks on Sigurðr's wounds—a kind of dragon-like rage that is more fully explained in the prose conclusion to the poem, which tells how Brynhildr sacrifices eight of her male and five of her female attendants before killing herself. Guðrún, however, goes to the wilderness and then to Denmark, where her life will eventually resume. In other words, the poem begins with Guðrún's intended death but ends with Brynhildr's death instead, and the peripeteia, the turning point, occurs at the juncture at which Gullrönd's action impels Guðrún to weep. Weeping, the release of tears, rather than simply being an external sign of emotional grief, is efficacious in this narrative. The stanza of the poem in which Brynhildr exudes fire and poison as she looks on the body of Sigurðr is difficult on the denotative level, and the full implications of these lines are not perfectly understood.

Stóð hon und stoð,
strengði hon elvi;
brann Brynhildi
Buðla dóttur,
eldr ór augom,
eitri fnæsti,
er hon sár of leit
á Sigurði. (st. 27)

[She stood by the pillar (?), she strengthened [herself] with might. Fire burned from the eyes of Brynhildr the daughter of Buðli, she snorted poison when she looked upon the wounds of Sigurðr.]

But it is noteworthy that Brynhildr never weeps over the tragedy she has brought about, and that she goes to her death not so much because she despairs over the loss of her love Sigurðr, but as a kind of sacrifice to honor the death of the hero.

I would argue, then, that in terms of a purely formal reading of *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, one can make a strong case for the conception that tears and the open expression of grief are important to the

healing process, and that denying the expression of grief is potentially destructive and indeed life-threatening. Similar ideas are widely expressed in contemporary (modern) popular psychology and elsewhere, and it could be argued that such ideas are virtually a human universal. But one would not want to explicate an Eddic poem on the basis of modern American popular psychology, and the balance between emotional expressivity and restraint differs so widely in different cultures that appeals to universal human ideals are suspect at best. Given this reading of the poem, then, one immediate question is what medieval parallels exist for the notion that restraining one's grief is potentially dangerous, and I wish to cite some analogues for this motif in twelfth-century medieval romances that have not—as far as I know—been noted.

One particularly clear example occurs in the prologue to Gottfried's *Tristan*—Gottfried's account of the conception and birth of the hero Tristan. Rivalin and Blanche-flor have become lovers in Cornwall, and once it is clear that Blanche-flor is pregnant, they have eloped to Parmenie together. Rivalin is lord of Parmenie, but he has initiated a state of war in which he is eventually killed. When the news of his death is brought to his wife, she is devastated.

Diz ist geschehen, ez muoz nu sin:
erst tot der guote Riwalin;
dan hoeret nu niht mere zuo
wan eine, daz man umbe in tuo
als mit rehte umb einen toten man

und sul wir sprechen vürbaz,
wiez umbe Blanschefliure kam:
do diu vil schoene vernam
diu clagebæren mære,
wie do ir herzen wære,
got herre, daz solt du bewarn,
daz wir daz iemer ervarn!
ichn han da keinen zwivel an,
gewan ie wip durch lieben man
totlichen herzesmerzen,
dern wære ouch in ir herzen
daz was totliches leides vol.
si bewarte al der werlde wol,
daz ir sin tot ze herzen gie.
ir ougen diu enwurden nie
in allem disem leide naz.
ja got herre, wie kam daz,
daz da niht wart gewienet?

da was ir herze ersteinet:
 dan was niht lebenes inne
 niwan diu lebende minne
 und daz vil lebeliche leit,
 daz lebende uf ir leben streit.
 geclagetes aber ir herren iht
 mit clageworten? nein si niht:
 si erstummete an der stunde,
 ir clage starp in ir munde;
 ir zunge, ir munt, ir herze, ir sin,
 daz was allez do da hin.
 diu schœne enclagete do nieme:
 sin sprach do weder ach noch we;
 si seic et nider unde lac
 quelende unz an den vierden tac
 erbermeclicher dan ie wip
 si want sich unde brach ir lip
 sus unde so, her unde dar
 und treip daz an, biz si gebar
 ein sünelin mit maneger not.
 steht, daz genas und lac si tot. (ed. Ranke ll. 1703–1750)

[It has come to pass, it has to be: good Rivalin is dead. No more is required of them than to pay him the dues of a dead man, for there is nothing else to be done . . .

When the lovely woman heard the grievous news, Lord God preserve us from ever knowing what she felt in her heart! I do not doubt that if any woman suffered mortal pain on account of a man who was dear to her, such pain was present in her heart. Her heart was full of mortal anguish. The signs were there in her for all to see that his death had pierced her to the heart. Yet in all this grief her eyes never once grew moist. But God Almighty, how came it that there was no weeping there? Her heart had turned to stone. There was no life in it but for the living love and very lively anguish that, living, warred against her life. Did she lament her lord at all with words of lamentation? Not she. She fell mute in that same hour, her plaint died in her mouth. Her tongue, her mouth, her heart, her mind were all spent. The fair lady had done with lamenting. She cried neither woe! nor alas! She sank to the ground and lay in agony until the fourth day, more piteously than any other woman. She twisted and turned and writhed, this way, that way, to and fro, and continued so until, with much labour, she bore a little son. But see, it lived and she lay dead.] (trans. Hatto 63)

Gottfried's account of the death of Blanchefflor parallels the emotional context of the opening stanzas of *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* quite closely. A young wife learns of the death of her husband, and she is devastated by grief. But she does not weep or show any external sign of emotion; she simply collapses, and her heart turns to stone. In the case of poor Blanchefflor, however, she has no wise counselor such as Gullrönd who can force her to weep and show emotion, so Blanchefflor simply

grieves until she goes into labor and gives birth to Tristan and then she dies. Blanche-flor never expresses her sorrow, and in the end, her grief kills her. While in *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* the conception that unexpressed grief can kill you is not stated directly—although it is clearly implied—Gottfried is quite direct in explaining the physiological consequences of unexpressed grief. Blanche-flor's heart was *ersteinet* [turned into stone]; there was nothing living within it except her *lebende minne* [living love], which struggled against her life. Without the release that tears can bring, her life is jeopardized and eventually ended.

It is not only women who can be destroyed by too great grief. The Old French early thirteenth-century prose romance, *Lancelot du Lac*, explains the premature death of Lancelot's father, King Ban, as the result of grief at the destruction of the greatest castle of his realm, grief so great that he could not weep.

Si a pitié de ce qu'il convanra son fil issir d'enfance en povreté et an dolor, et sa fame estre en autrui dongier que el suen et an avoeries de maintes genz, et lui meïsmes covendra estre povre et veillart, et en grant souffraite user sa vie lo remanant, qui tant a esté dotez et riches et qui tant a amee bele compaignie de genz et joieuse maisniee en sa jovente. Totes ces choses recorde les rois et i met devant ses iauz, et li toiche au cuer si grant dolors que li lermes li sont estopees et li cuers serrez el vantre, et se pasme, si chiet de son palefroï a terre si durement que par un po que li cox ne li brise. Si li saut parmi la boiche et parmi lo nes li sans vermauz et parmi les oroilles amedeus. (ed. Kennedy I, 13).

[He was saddened to think that his son must grow up in poverty and sorrow, and his wife be in someone else's power, and under the protection of many people, and he himself would be poor and old, and spend the rest of his life in great poverty, he who had been so rich and powerful, and who in his youth had so loved pleasant company and a joyful household. The king thought of all these things and pictured them in his mind, and such great sorrow pierced his heart that his tears were stopped up and his heart wrung within him, and he fainted, and fell from his palfrey to the ground, so hard that his neck was nearly broken, and the red blood spurted from his nose and mouth and from his two ears.] (trans. Corley 18–19)

The king then utters an extended prayer that focuses on his concern for his impoverished wife and son: “li cuer li est partiz dedanz lo ventre, et il jut morz a terre” (ed. Kennedy I, 14) [his heart broke in his breast and he lay dead on the ground] (trans. Corley 20).

The death of King Ban raises a variety of interesting problems, but in the context of the present argument, I am primarily interested in the physiology and psychology of his death. He is afflicted by a sudden and devastating grief, in this instance, the loss of his realm,

and the grief is so great that his tears were stopped up and his heart *serrez* [closed up] so that in consequence he swoons and eventually dies. As in the other narratives we have looked at, it is not so much grief that kills him as the fact that his grief cannot find some appropriate outlet.

One final example of this idea—although late and perhaps not as absolutely clear as the texts I have previously cited—occurs in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. After the death of Arcite, Chaucer speaks of the exaggerated mourning of both Emelye, Arcite's fiancé, and Palamon, Arcite's rival, adversary in the tournament, and former friend. He concludes this passage with general reflections about women and their grief for their lost lovers or husbands, which is not apparently in his source.

Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon,
And Theseus his suster took anon
Swownynge, and baar hire fro the corps away
What helpeth it to tarien forth the day
To tellen how she weep bothe eve and morwe?
For in swich cas wommen have swich sorwe
Whan that hir housbondes ben from hem ago,
That for the moore part they sorwen so
Or ellis fallen in swich maladye
That at the laste certainly they dye. (ed. Benson ll., 2817–2826)

One does not normally gloss a problem in an Eddic poem by citing parallels from medieval romance texts, but these parallels are close enough so that one can argue that the conception that tears and expressive grief are an important part of the healing process—and the converse—that holding back tears is potentially dangerous was in fact current. As far as the dates of these texts are concerned, the dates of at least my first two parallels do not present an insuperable problem. *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* is generally considered one of the later Eddic poems, and indeed parallels with later Scandinavian ballad tradition have been adduced (Mohr). To the degree that scholars have reached a consensus, the poem is thought to have been composed in the form in which we have it in the twelfth century, while Gottfried's *Tristan* and the *Lancelot do Lac* are early thirteenth-century texts. But I am citing these works not as potential sources for the Eddic poem but as texts which illustrate that certain ideas about grief and self-expression were in fact current during this period. Neither Gottfried nor the anonymous author of the Old French romance would have had a reason to express new and original ideas in episodes of this sort; they

both expect their audience to take for granted the idea that unexpressed grief is dangerous. It follows that the ideas with which I am concerned were current by the twelfth century and may have been current much earlier.

Once one turns to more broadly defined analogues for these ideas about grief and healing, an immediate one is a myth that Snorri narrates about the death of Baldr. After Baldr was slain, Hermóðr was sent to the realm of the dead to ask if Baldr could be returned to the land of the living. It was agreed that if all of the creatures in the world of the living, animate and inanimate, would weep for Baldr, then Baldr would be allowed to return. The gods, men, and the creatures of the natural world all wept for Baldr, but Loki, in the form of the giantess Þökk, refused to weep, and Baldr was condemned forever to the realm of the dead. In this myth, tears and healing are associated even if the ultimate point of the story underscores the inexorability of death (ed. Faulkes 47–48).

One of the conventions of Old Norse-Icelandic literature is a kind of stoic suppression of emotion. There are numerous instances in the sagas of warriors who face death without expressing emotion, and in this literature as a whole, emotions are often only hinted at. But a rich literary tradition allows for many viewpoints, and if stoic reticence is ordinarily characteristic of this literature, the author of *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* was aware of the larger emotional truth that grief can only be suppressed at a high price. The poet may have learned this truth from romance narratives of the twelfth century, which underlie the “classic” romances that I have cited, or this may well have been a theme in the native Germanic poetic tradition that the Eddic poets for the most part drew on. The familiar debate between nativists and comparativists is both irresolvable and boring. But the analogues I have cited do show that the poet who composed *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta* was not the only poet of the period who was aware that tears and the poetry of lament can help those who are devastated by grief. The Eddic poems are often thought of as Germanic in the Wagnerian sense, and certainly there is much in this corpus of poetry to support this view. But these poems also sometimes embody a gentler wisdom, and *Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta*, whenever it was composed, speaks of tears and poetry in deeply positive terms as a necessary part of the healing process.

Notes

1. All Eddic quotations are from Neckel & Kuhn. Norse translations are the author's. Cf. also von See *et al.* 6:195–278.

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“Gerðit Hon ... sem konor aðrar”

Women and Subversion in Eddic Heroic Poetry

Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir

Eddic heroic poetry is known for its striking women: many are formidable, scheming, disobedient, and uncompromising female characters who frequently manage to create and succeed in their own agendas rather than those thrust on them by men. Brynhildr is the primary example, and Guðrún’s character develops in a subversive direction in the latter part of her life. Characters who have received less attention, such as Oddrún and Borgný of *Oddrúnargrátr*, and especially Sváva of the Helgi poems, deviate in other ways, pursuing covert premarital sexual relationships. Principally, women use language rather than actions to carve out their roles and to subvert gender norms; speech acts (as defined by J. L. Austin and developed by John Searle and others) such as oaths, laments, prophecies, and incitements, uttered by women and mainly directed at men—although sometimes seen as literary devices—are, as I will argue, used to claim female subjectivity and autonomy. Previous criticism has illuminated whetting (i.e., incitement) and lament, the traditional speech acts available to women in Eddic and saga literature, and their place in the Germanic male honor system.¹ Brynhildr, typically viewed in terms of whetting, is the archetypal “speaker,” and her identity is constructed through her speech throughout the *Edda*. Less attention has been devoted to oath-taking, a form of speech usually associated with male-coded activities and identities, and curses, which grant women agency to some extent. Rather than subscribing to a notion of female solidarity, women often quarrel about, even police, appropriate female

conduct and accuse each other of inappropriate behavior. In her laments, Guðrún more subtly calls attention to the grief her family have caused her, and her failure to act or speak after Sigurðr's death as well as her attempts to resist the machinations of her deceitful family signal her later deviance. Thus, speech acts appear in a subversive light in the poems, enabling women to shirk and critique the traditional, passive roles they are expected to fulfill.

The poems of the *Edda* are likely to have been composed at different times and in different contexts for varying audiences, and by poets who emphasized different aspects of the Völsung narrative, perhaps twisting them to suit their aims. These poems were then preserved orally over generations before they were recorded in the Codex Regius. I do not therefore work from the idea of a reconstructed ur-text, a unified representation of the characters, or “original” vs. “contaminated” or “late” versions of the narrative. All that can be said for certain is that there was a thirteenth-century audience in Iceland for which the Codex Regius was compiled and who was the reception group for the poems.² In what follows, female characters will be examined as figures representing appropriate and subversive behavior in a thirteenth-century Icelandic context: women's words are seen as an outlet for social critique with the potential to subvert the dominant order and express anxieties about female power. This analysis will thus illuminate the extent and limits of female subversion in speech and action in Eddic heroic poetry, often by reading “against the grain” to reveal the gender roles the poets portray as normative.³

Transgression in Words: Speech Acts

Brynhildr Buðladóttir can be characterized as primarily a speaker in Eddic poetry. Her identity is constructed by her utterances rather than by her actions, from her first appearance in *Sigrdrífumál* where, as Sigrdrífa, she teaches the young Sigurðr valuable practical knowledge as well as gnomic advice, until her last defence in *Helreið Brynhildar*. In addition to her spatial freedom away from the royal halls and bowers in which other women appear, and her independence of action during her early life as a valkyrie, what marks Brynhildr as subversive is her deliberate and (self-)conscious use of language, often intended by her to function as speech acts. She takes oaths that she makes every

effort to fulfill, as well as holding others to their word, reproaching and blaming them with ferocity when, in her view, they have gone back on their promises. Furthermore, she utters a number of prophecies, especially so in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*'s many strophes devoted to her prediction of future events, and in *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch), where Brynhildr's first social interaction with Guðrún sees her as a harbinger of doom, prophesying about Guðrún's misfortunes.

Many women in the *Edda* are marked by their refusal to speak and act as they ought, at least in the eyes of some of the poems' male characters, and thus probably the hegemonic thirteenth-century reading position. This transgression can appear in both excessive and inappropriate verbosity, and the pronouncement and performance of speech acts, such as vows, curses, and even prophecies, which threaten to disrupt the status quo. This type of heightened speech functions as an "event" or act according to J. L. Austin's definition: words that are not a statement, true or false, or the pronouncement of an opinion, but instead, they transform a state of being such as a person's status or the relationship between parties. A verbal utterance is thereby an *act*. Austin's taxonomy of speech acts further categorizes the oath as "commissive," meaning that it commits the speaker to what he or she promises to do in the oath (156–157). As John R. Searle outlines, there is a difference between the utterances "I intend to do X," on the one hand, and "I swear to do X" on the other; the latter example implies the existence of a so-called "illocutionary force" behind the utterance that binds the speaker to it while the former only expresses someone's plan without any obligation.⁴ Certain conditions need to be fulfilled for the speech act to be "felicitous."⁵ First, speakers must be qualified to perform the speech act (e.g., by virtue of their legitimate authority or social status), and second, the speech act must have been heard and understood by someone; if these conditions are not fulfilled, it may be considered void (Austin 22). This understanding underpins Elaine Tennant's definition of the performative as a culturally conditioned act that is understood as such if it follows conventions to a sufficient extent for members of the community to recognize it (273–316). In the next section, I will contextualize Brynhildr's utterances within speech act theory and examine their relationship with the gender and honor systems at work in the world depicted in the *Edda*.

Oaths

Eddic poems consistently portray vows as most important to Brynhildr, not only other people's, but also her own, hence her recurrent references to them (e.g., in *Skamma* 39; *Helreið* st. 5; *Völsunga saga* ch. 31). Peter Habbe defines an oath as “speech which possesses the quality of a ritual act,” an utterance (often performed in conjunction with certain physical actions and props, such as hand gestures or relics) understood as a serious undertaking.⁶ In Old Norse sources, oaths appear in many contexts, both public and private, establishing reciprocal bonds between men, in the hall at feasts, and in assemblies and legal proceedings, where an oath solemnly sworn by a party to a case has evidentiary weight (Páll Sigurðsson 8). Although oaths still have *gravitas* in modern Western culture, they were particularly important in a preliterate culture such as medieval Iceland, where written legal documents such as tracts and charters, which to some extent supplanted the need for witnesses, were not yet in widespread use. Oaths are inextricably bound up with honor, and although oath-takers appeal to their god(s) as witness, Habbe argues that the fear of God was not what drove people to keep their oaths in the society depicted in the *Íslendingasögur*, but rather the threat of losing personal honor. Thus, oaths entail socio-political as well as religious and legal dimensions (2005, 157).⁷ Oaths can be regarded as a commitment with social validity: communities demand that their members fulfill their oaths in order to prevent social disintegration. Thus, oaths are not to be undertaken lightly, for they imply a sacred and solemn duty to oneself and one's honor, the community, and, in cases where they involve a bond with the recipient, another person.

When oaths are performed by male characters in the *Edda*, such as Sigurðr and the Gjúkungs, the context is relatively straightforward and conventional: in this instance, the oath-takers become sworn-brothers who vow allegiance to each other.⁸ Oaths between men can also be undertaken with the aim to prevent feud, as we can see from Dagr's oath of allegiance to the Völsungs after the battle against the sons of Granmar (*HH II* prose after st. 18) or Atli's similar oath to Gunnarr (*Atlakviða* st. 30); significantly, neither of these oaths hold. The full account of Sigurðr's oath-taking with the Gjúkungs—briefly alluded to in *Skamma* 1—was presumably narrated in the lost poems of the “great lacuna” (the gathering physically lost from the manuscript); *Völsunga saga* relates how Sigurðr was received into the Gjúkung clan

at the urging of Grímhildr (Larrington 2011, 178). These oaths, which the raven in *Brot* st. 5 predicts will be the destruction of the Gjúkungs, are broken when Högni and Gunnarr plot Sigurðr's murder (even though in some versions they do not carry it out themselves). Thus, in *Brot* sts. 16–17, Brynhildr reproaches the Gjúkungs for breaking their oaths with Sigurðr and predicts their consequent downfall: “Svá mun öll yðor ætt Niflunga / afli gengin—eroð eiðrofa!” [so from all of you of the Niflung line / your strength will pass away: you are oath-breakers].⁹

Following the heroic ethical code is the foremost social imperative in this culture. Yet, despite the gravity of oaths as a central tenet in the maintenance of personal honor, as a speech act they must yield to another threat to men's honor: Brynhildr's whetting (cf. *Brot* st. 3; *Skamma* sts. 10–11) and its subtext, the accusation of unmanliness.¹⁰ The Norse tradition (represented in *Skamma* st. 20; *Gkv II* st. 7) tries to circumvent this result by employing Guttormr as the instrument of Gunnarr and Högni—since he was not party to the oath-taking ceremony between the Gjúkungs and Sigurðr—but his brothers are considered accessory to murder even if they did not technically take part in the killing.¹¹ Gunnarr's reaction to Brynhildr's accusations of oath-breaking—pleading with her and attempting to bribe her with riches, so as to calm her down and prevent her immediately from committing suicide (*Völsunga saga* ch. 29)—is opposite to that of Dagr in a similar situation vis-à-vis Helgi in *HH II* st. 34. Sigrún's wrath at her brother's murder of Helgi, and her curses, shock Dagr, not because he is embarrassed by his oath-breaking, but he is aghast that Sigrún would respond to it so violently and dare to reproach her brother for his arguably immoral actions. Helgi summarily dismisses Sigrún's curses and accusations by calling her insane (st. 34). *Skamma* also shows Gunnarr deflecting the blame for Sigurðr's murder onto Brynhildr, branding her *heiptgjörn* “eager for revenge” and saying she deserves to see her brother executed before her eyes (sts. 31–32).¹² Two different views toward oath-buttressed obligation are expressed in these poems: when faced with choosing between the two, male characters privilege the demand for avenging one's kinsman and maintaining untainted masculinity over keeping oaths to one's sworn brothers, whereas the women place greater emphasis on the latter, although Gunnarr's flustered attempts to silence Brynhildr seem to be a tacit acknowledgment of his betrayal of Sigurðr and the community at large. These poems underscore the difficulty of upholding oaths when they are in tension with other bonds, so their failure is a result

of their operation within a complex network of competing social and familial ties and obligations (Andersson 72; Quinn 2012a).

Brynhildr's own oaths vis-à-vis Sigurðr are a more complex matter. First, two distinct Eddic traditions of the betrothal are formed between Brynhildr and Sigurðr (Andersson 28–34, 47–49; Quinn 2012b). One version of the *Völsunga* narrative assumes that Brynhildr and Sigurðr were betrothed prior to his arrival at the court of the Gjókungs, when they first met on the mountain (if Brynhildr is to be identified with Sigrdrífa) and then that they later repeated these vows to one another when Sigurðr next sought Brynhildr out at her brother-in-law Heimir's abode.¹³ The lacuna in the *Codex Regius* prevents us from knowing exactly what course of events Eddic material would have preserved, but *Völsunga saga* ch. 22 relates the following when Sigurðr has received Sigrdrífa's wisdom on the mountain:

Sigurðr mælti, “Engi finnsk þér vitrari maðr, ok þess sver ek at þik skal ek eiga, ok þú ert við mitt æði.”
Hon svarar, “Þik vil ek helzt eiga, þótt ek kjósa um alla menn.” Ok þetta bundu þau eiðum með sér. (ed. Finch 40)

[Sigurðr said: “No one is wiser than you and I swear that I will marry you and you are a good match to my nature.” She replies: “I would most want to marry you even if I could choose from all other men.” And they made a commitment to one other with oaths.]

In the absence of Eddic evidence, this passage suggests that, at least according to the tradition to which the author-compiler of *Völsunga saga* had access—or the one that he chose to follow—the couple each swore an oath to the other on the mountain in the tradition of a *verba de futuro* formula, supported by the alliterative quality of *eiga* and *æði* in Sigurðr's speech.¹⁴ These oaths are alluded to later on by Brynhildr in conversations with Heimir (*Völsunga saga* ch. 29) and Sigurðr (ch. 31), and both she and Guðrún refer to Sigurðr as Brynhildr's *frumverr* “first lover” (chs. 27–28). *Völsunga saga* ch. 25, set in Heimir's court, then explicitly states that the pair exchanged oaths:

Sigurðr svarar ... “þess sver ek við guðin at ek skal þik eiga eða enga konu ella.”

Hon mælti slíkt. Sigurðr þakkar henni þessi ummæli ok gaf henni gullhring, ok svörðu nú eiða af nýju. (ed. Finch 43–44)

[Sigurðr replies: ... “I swear by the gods that I shall marry you or else no other woman”. She spoke to the same effect. Sigurðr thanks her for this speech and gave her a gold ring. And then they swore oaths again.]

Despite these exchanges between Sigurðr and Brynhildr, Sigurðr is subsequently betrothed to Guðrún (according to *Völsunga saga* ch. 24, because of the drink of forgetfulness administered by Grímhildr), and he then woos Brynhildr, in disguise, on behalf of Gunnarr, placing a sword between them for the three nights they sleep together on the mountain.¹⁵ This deception and betrayal, discovered too late by Brynhildr, is what ultimately leads to her demand for Sigurðr to be killed.

It is clear that a betrothal—an exchange of mutual oaths—existed between the two, but there is the additional question of Brynhildr's independent oath sworn to herself. In *Skamma* st. 6, Brynhildr declares that she will marry Sigurðr or else die: “Hafa scal ec Sigurð—eða þó sverti!—/ mög frumungan, mér á armi” [I will have Sigurd—or I shall die—/ that young man I'll have in my arms], an utterance that may not appear to be an oath in context. However, it seems retrospectively clear from her use of the verb *hétumk* [I vowed] in *Skamma* st. 39, “Þeim hétomc þá / er með gulli sat á Grana bógom” [To him I'd betrothed myself / when he sat on Grani's back with his gold], that she regards herself as having uttered a valid oath, and her commitment to herself and her honor are the driving force behind her demand that Sigurðr be killed.¹⁶ The power of these words is hinted at by the poem when Brynhildr states that she will regret them in the future, although in the same breath she claims that their result is inevitable, a fate decreed by the norms (*Skamma* st. 7).

Discussing the goddess Frigg's obtaining of the oaths after Baldr's death, John Lindow notes that it is extremely rare for women to be involved in oath-taking whether in private or in ritual (49). Brynhildr's oaths, as a defining and consistent feature of her characterization in the *Edda*, open up the question of women's eligibility to swear oaths, whether alone or with another person. In which circumstances, if any, could women swear oaths with legal and/or social efficacy in the eyes of the medieval Icelandic audience, and within the constructed reality of Old Norse literature? If Brynhildr's oaths transgress her female role, then could they still be seen as valid, due to her exceptional nature as a former valkyrie, or is she doing the impossible: claiming a masculine subject position and thus subverting, even abandoning, her gender role? Keeping in mind the condition that a valid oath needs to be heard and culturally accepted within the constructed world of the narrative (see above), can she legitimately accuse the Gjúkungs of making her *eiðrofa* “oath-torn” if she was never eligible to swear this type of oath in the first

place?

There are few examples of other female characters uttering oaths in Old Norse sources, whether literary or historical, especially in contrast with the plethora of male-performed oaths.¹⁷ Snorri Sturluson mentions the goddess Vár in his list of twelve female deities in his prose *Edda*, noting that she listens to people's oaths (ed. Faulkes ch. 35). Apart from *Brymskviða*, his likely source, little more is known of Vár; she is unattested elsewhere, and there are no stories about her so she may be invented by Snorri from the abstract noun *várar*, denoting private agreements between men and women.¹⁸ It is noteworthy that she is the goddess of marriage vows, denoting a connection with, perhaps personification of, fidelity in marriage, whether in Snorri's mind or real pagan belief. According to medieval Icelandic law codes, however, women did not swear an oath at their weddings, which was an exchange between father and groom.¹⁹ In the scarce examples from the saga corpus where women do perform oaths, they predominantly relate to a woman's relationship to her husband or lover. The most distinctive female-coded oath is when the woman must prove her fidelity (reminiscent of Vár's role); this ordeal ceremony normally has a religious context, in that God adjudges the truth by preventing the oath-taker from suffering serious burning.²⁰ Another occurrence appears in *Oddrúnargrátr* st. 33 where Oddrún, Brynhildr's sister, is said to have vowed always to give aid to royal families; again, a woman's duty to others is privileged over her own self-determination, and in *Atlamál* st. 81, Guðrún lies awake at night following the death of her brothers, vowing to punish Atli: "Svaf ec miðc sialdan, síðans þeir fello, / hét ec þér hörðo, hefi ec þic nú mintan" [I've hardly slept since they died, / I promised you a grim reward, now I'm reminding you of it]. She takes revenge by killing her own children by Atli. In *Helreið* st. 6, Brynhildr states that at the age of twelve, she vowed to bestow victory in battle on the young warrior *Auðo bróðir* [the brother of Auða] fighting against Hjálm-Gunnarr; thus Sigurðr is not the first man to be the object of Brynhildr's oaths. However, this battle-related oath is likely socially sanctioned since Brynhildr is performing her duty as a valkyrie.

Regardless of these rare occurrences of women performing oaths, the central issue at stake is that Brynhildr's oath to marry only the man who knows no fear seems to correspond to none of the above examples but rather a male-coded speech act, the *heitstrenging* [solemn vow], which may not have been available to women. It is possible that such an oath is understood to be open to valkyries, as they are

supernatural beings that do not submit to human laws, but marriage and a valkyrie life-style seem to be mutually exclusive (Quinn 2012a). In *Sigrdrífumál*, Óðinn's punishment for Sigrdrífa going against his wishes is that she would never have another victory in battle and she must be married; Sigrdrífa counter-vows that she will only marry the man who knew no fear: "ec strengðac heit þar í mót at giptaz ongum þeim manni, er hrœðaz kynni" [I vowed in return never to marry any man who knew fear] (prose before st. 5). The irate Brynhildr refers to this oath in her conversations after the river quarrel, first to Gunnarr in *Völsunga saga* ch. 31:

ek hétumsk þeim er riði hestinum Grana með Fáfnis arfi ok riði minn vafroga ok dræpi þá menn er ek kvað á. Nú treystisk engi at ríða nema Sigurðr einn. ... Og þess strengða ek heit heima að feðr míns, at ek munda þeim einum unna, er ágæztr væri alinn, en þat er Sigurðr. (ed. Finch 53)

[I vowed to marry the man who would ride the horse Grani with Fáfñir's inheritance, and who would ride through the leaping flames and kill those men I named. Now no one dared ride except Sigurðr alone. ... And I swore the oath at my father's home that I would love only the most outstanding man, who is Sigurðr.]

and then to Sigurðr: "Ek vann eið at eiga þann mann er riði minn vafroga, en þann eið vilda ek halda eða deyja ella" [I swore an oath to marry the man who rode through my leaping flames, and I would keep that oath or else die] (ed. Finch 56).²¹

The illocutionary force of Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr's vow is not a reciprocal pledge to marry made to another person (cf. *verba de futuro*) or to follow certain duties (as in Oddrún's case), but rather her promise to herself regarding a future act. It is a solemn pledge she is portrayed as considering binding and irrevocable. The female performance of such an oath is as far as I know unparalleled in the Old Norse corpus, suggesting that it was not considered an appropriate female speech act. Support of this view appears in *Hrólfs saga kraka* ch. 17, where Yrsa pledges never to be loyal to King Aðils, and to try to hurt his men, in return for his betrayal of her husband Helgi. Aðils "bað hana at heitast ekki við sik né berserki sína—'því at þat skal þér eigi duga'" [told her not to make a vow about him nor his berserks—"for it will not help you"] (ed. Guðni Jónsson 1950 1.32) and offers Yrsa compensation for Helgi. Aðils's words that it will be no use for her to *heitask* [make a vow] could suggest that Yrsa has illegitimately performed an oath, since Aðils declares it ineffective (*eigi duga*), again prompting the question of women's eligibility to

perform oaths other than those concerned with duty and faithfulness to their lovers or members of their (high) social rank.²² Later in the saga, Yrsa assists her son Hrólfr kraki defeat Aðils by giving him battle gear and gold rings belonging to Aðils, items that prove instrumental in his defeat. Both women's vows are addressed to their antagonist: the latter is spoken to Aðils in his presence and the former is Sigrdrífa/Brynhildr's riposte to Óðinn's punishment, but his reaction is not made known—yet her modification of his curse seems to remain in force in the narrator's eyes. Given the socially dependent relationship between oaths and honor, and the fact that Yrsa's oath is challenged in the text, it seems possible, even likely, that the validity of these female oaths to perform a future action in which the recipient is involved would be questioned by the thirteenth-century audience, rendering the oaths, however solemnly performed (within the context of the narrative), infelicitous.

After Sigurðr's murder, Brynhildr harshly accuses the Gjúkungs of breaking their oaths to Sigurðr, but she also complains that she has been made to renege on her own oaths because of the betrayal of others (e.g., in *Skamma* st. 57), where she complains: “Margs á ec minnaz, hvé við mic fóro / þá er mic sára svicna höfðot; / vaðin at vilia varc, meðan ec lifðac” [Much I remember: how they acted against me, / those who betrayed me, caused me pain; deprived of joy was I while I lived]. Brynhildr's accusation of betrayal regarding her betrothal to Sigurðr is also stated in *Völsunga saga* ch. 31: “[hon] minnisk nú á þat er þau fundusk á fjallinu ok sórusk eiða,—‘En nú er því öllu brugðit, ok vil ek eigi lifa’” [she now reminisces about the time when they met on the mountain and swore oaths,—“but now it has all been betrayed and I do not wish to live”] (ed. Finch 56). *Helreið* st. 5, where the poignant outburst “gorðu mic Giúca arfar/ ástalausar oc eiðrofa” [the heirs of Gjúki deprived me of love and caused me to break my oaths] is her final statement about her dealings with the Gjúkungs, she refutes the giantess's accusations of her immorality with the claim that she and Sigurðr had been betrothed—bound by a mutual oath. Oath-breaking is clearly a serious and dishonorable offense in Old Norse sources; those who commit this crime receive a horrid punishment in Norse myth, and it is a term of abuse in some saga examples.²³ *Sigrdrífumál* st. 23, particularly apposite as it is spoken by Sigrdrífa, warns against treating oaths lightly: “Þat ræð ec þér annat, at þú eið né sverir / nema þann er saðr sé; / grimmir símar ganga at trygðrofi, / armr er vára vargr” [do not swear an oath / unless it is truly kept; / terrible fate-bonds attach to

the oath-tearer / wretched is the pledge-criminal].²⁴ This view is echoed in law codes: *Grágás* states that if someone breaks a truce (*grið*), a form of oath to keep the peace between feuding parties, they shall be driven off like wolves; elsewhere, truce-breaking is punishable by *skóggangr* “full outlawry,” which entailed the complete severance of the culprit’s ties to society.²⁵ As Judy Quinn notes, both sisters, Brynhildr and Oddrún, are faithful in their oaths (as far as possible), further underscoring the inherent difference between Buðli’s female offspring (although clearly not true of Atli) and the oath-breaking Gjúkungs.²⁶ Perhaps the weight that Brynhildr is shown to place on oaths, and her anger at the Gjúkungs for being oath-breakers and for making her into one, is not surprising in this context, reflecting the moral value placed on oath-taking and oath-keeping in medieval Iceland. Brynhildr’s subversive performance of male-coded oaths reflects a patriarchal anxiety toward women appropriating male roles and thus claiming agency and self-determination against their families’ will.

At the end of *Guðrúnarkviða I*, when Brynhildr has assertively refuted the accusations lodged against her that she is to blame for Sigurðr’s death, and in turn has blamed Atli and his greed for the evil that has befallen her (as a result of his forcing her to marry against her will), she is ultimately, if perhaps metaphorically, transformed into a dragon-like creature, emitting poison and fire: “brann Brynhildi, ... / eldr ór augom, eitri fnæsti” [fire burned from Brynhildr’s eyes, she spewed poison]. The last and enduring image of her in this poem—one that shows the interactions of women almost exclusively—is that of a woman out of control, seething with rage and despair. One might also think of Högni’s characterizations of Brynhildr in *Skamma* st. 45, where he implies that she enters this world cursed, not only because she causes harm to others—her very shape evokes a creature born with some kind of congenital disease: “Hon kröng of komz fyr kné móður / hon æ borin óvilja til, / mörgom manni at möðtrega” [From her mother’s womb she was born awkward, / she was ever born to misery / and to cause grief of heart to many a man]. Jeffrey Cohen describes the monster as a social construct: “The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence” (4). It is clearly unfeminine for a woman to be as verbally dominating, insistent, and aggressive as Brynhildr is in these poems. Therefore, her monstrous transformation here embodies a social fear of the woman who uses words to criticize the dominant order, to interrogate the

value of masculine vows as a guide to proper behavior—when they so easily yield to other desires, and who pursues her own agenda, separate from what the male characters have in mind, with words. Women who use language to challenge and subvert the social order are punished by being made monstrous.

Curses and Prophecies

A second speech act in which women engage on several occasions is cursing, often invoked as a direct result of the violation of an oath; the two speech acts thus interact, since being the object of a curse hinges on failure to fulfill one's oath. Once Sigrún's brother Dagr has killed Helgi for his slaying of Högni, their father, she has a heated argument with him in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*, and she curses him in no uncertain terms, declaring that various tools associated with masculine warfare activities (the sword, the ship, the horse) will fail him.²⁷ By killing Helgi, Dagr had followed the heroic code in accordance with the social norms of the legendary medieval North, and he cannot grasp that his sister would object to his actions so strongly. This prompts him to brand her as insane (st. 34): “*Øer ertu, ... ok ørvita*” [You are insane ... and out of your wits]. Yet since Dagr had sworn an oath to the Völsung clan (see above) of which Helgi is a member, Sigrún's statement that Dagr is an oath-breaker (st. 31) rings true and her curse seems justified, if not approved of by the male order. As Larrington notes, “one speech act (the oath) triggers another”: Dagr has broken his oath, and since Sigrún and Helgi were betrothed, Dagr cannot expect his sister to receive the news of Helgi's slaying by him with anything other than an unfavorable reaction (2011, 173). As stated above, male and female characters generally value oaths differently, and if an oath and personal honor are in conflict, men break their oaths, whereas women's sense of honor—with the exception of Brynhildr—is invested in the idea of unswerving loyalty to one's sworn-brother.

Guðrún similarly curses her brother Högni in *Gkv II* st. 9 for killing her husband and his sworn-brother Sigurðr: “*þitt scyli hiarta hrafnar slíta / víð lönd yfir*” [May ravens tear apart your heart over wide lands], evoking the macabre image of a slain warrior's corpse being torn apart by beasts of battle. In *Gkv I* st. 21, she predicts Gunnarr's

misfortune, stating that he will never enjoy the gold for which he slay Sigurðr but that “þeir muno þér baugar at bana verða” [the rings will be the death of you]. In both of these examples, the curse appears after brothers have killed their sisters’ lovers, much to their sorrow and anger. When read against the grain, the curse as speech act may be represented as efficacious, granted in compensation for women’s lack of formal power and thus their inability to exact revenge on their own behalf.

Curses are thus one of the speech acts available to women in Eddic poetry to further their own agenda; Brynhildr appears in at least two scenes with elements of cursing, the first of which involves her reaction to Gullrönd’s prompting Guðrún to mourn in *Gkv I* st. 23. In the final part of *Skamma* (sts. 53–65), Brynhildr issues pronouncements on the fate of the Gjúkungs and given their calamitous nature, these constitute curses as well as prophecies.²⁸ In this extended speech, she predicts the birth of Svanhildr, the daughter of Guðrún and Sigurðr, Guðrún’s unhappy marriage to Atli, Gunnarr and Oddrún’s covert, loving relationship—and Atli putting an end to it, Gunnarr’s death in a snake-pit, the murder of Atli and his sons by Guðrún, and Guðrún’s fate at Iörmunrekkr’s court. All these events foretold by Brynhildr materialize after her death, unfolding in the succeeding poems in the Codex Regius, and onlookers, at least Guðrún, seem to take heed of Brynhildr’s warnings. Later in the narrative cycle, Guðrún reminds her mother Grímhildr of her brothers’ terrible prospects in a quarrel between them in *Gkv II* st. 31, in which Guðrún attempts to resist her mother’s machinations to marry her to Atli. Brynhildr’s knowledge of the future, and her speech aimed at the Gjúkungs, work not just as a foreshadowing device and summary of events narrated later in the Codex Regius, but they also produce a sense of inevitable doom in an already disastrous situation, alerting the audience to the fact, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the entire cast of characters—apart from Guðrún—will meet an untimely and gruesome death. As Brynhildr’s whetting led to Sigurðr’s death, just so her pronouncements after his death further contribute to the Gjúkungs’s misfortunes; there is a blurred line between prophesying misfortune and causing it with curses. Brynhildr’s prophecy does not perhaps *cause* the Gjúkungs’s subsequent downfall, but it calls attention to the inherent workings of a society governed by the heroic ethic and its honor code, and it accurately describes how it will eventually fail and self-destruct (Clark 2005, 173–200; 2007, 21–41).

Lament and Whetting

Guðrún is shorn of all her male relatives (although partly as a result of her own actions); poems such as *Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*, set late in Guðrún's career, emphasize her isolation, as well as her lamentations about her fate. Critics have mostly come to the consensus that lament and whetting are typical female speech acts that were most likely legitimately available to (some) women during the medieval period, although when and to what extent is not clear; historically, the two forms may have been socially sanctioned female speech acts, either formally or covertly. Lament and whetting appear in direct relation to some of the most important aspects of Guðrún's experience. When she employs the former speech act, it yields scant results since it does not have any effect on her family's behavior nor does it lead to vengeance exacted for Sigurðr. Guðrún eventually becomes consumed by the pursuit of revenge, leading to the destruction of all her descendants, and she exits the story as a hard-minded and lone woman, clinging on to her notion of personal honor as achieved by vengeance. Brynhildr and Guðrún end their lives in similar circumstances, isolated in their subversion of their gender role: the one cursing and making ominous prophecies, the other vacillating between lamenting and demanding revenge, both refusing to compromise on upholding their honor.

Guðrún emerges as a complex character throughout her Eddic biography, by turns a sympathetic victim of her kin's ambition and greed (*Guðrúnarkviða I-II*), defiant and proud in the face of accusations of adultery (*Guðrúnarkviða III*) and a cold-hearted matriarch, egging her sons to their death (*Guðrúnarhvöt* and *Hamðismál*). At the beginning of *Guðrúnarkviða I*, she goes in the opposite direction from the verbal excesses of Brynhildr and refuses to say or do anything at all that is expected of her. She does not "act as other women" after the loss of a loved one: "gerðit hon hiúfra né höndom slá, / né qveina um sem konor aðrar" [she did not weep or strike her hands together / or lament like other women] (st. 1). The poem contrasts Guðrún's behavior strongly with other women's; she does not engage in the regular actions of mourning women—wailing, lamenting, and physical gestures and movements—clearly regarded as the norm. This ritual seems to be not only expected of, but also reserved for, the widow of the deceased, since when Brynhildr prepares to launch into a lament for Sigurðr, she is met with a

marked, embarrassed silence from onlookers (*Brot* sts. 18–19). Although the poem relates that Guðrún is so full of grief as to be incapable of lamenting, the phrase that “she did not ... do as other women,” with the added fact that after the other women’s laments she is described as *harðhuguð* “hard-hearted” (*Gkv I* sts. 5, 11) and her *harðr hugr* “severe, implacable mind” (st. 2), which the *jarlar* “earls” try to mollify, suggests some degree of volition on Guðrún’s part. It could be seen as a determined refusal, rather than an incapability, to go through the motions of the public display and expression of grief expected of widows, to fulfill her duty to lament, and this is scandalous to onlookers (for a different reading of this scene, see Hill, [Chapter 5](#), this volume).

Guðrún’s sister, Gullrönd, finds this departure from the norm worrying, and this is a turning point for Guðrún and the beginning of her deviance. Gullrönd acts as a regulator: she dramatically forces her young sister to look on Sigurðr’s body and follow the customary grieving rituals, at the same time pushing her back into her conventional social role and making her conform. Sigurðr’s body is bloody, the shining eyes open but lifeless; the physical realism is overwhelming, and Guðrún collapses, performing the lament expected of a woman of her position (*Gkv I* st. 15). In the Eddic scene, the loose hair certainly symbolizes a violent loss of emotional control, but Guðrún has also perhaps lost control over herself: she has been forced to adhere to society’s norms, to conform to her gender role, by enacting the lament. Clover argues that the lament has historical grounding as a tool for disenfranchised women to influence, and indeed challenge, their male relatives to take blood-revenge, but here Guðrún’s own brothers are the culprits, and she cannot demand their death (Clover 167). Although she is compelled by her sister to perform the lament, Guðrún recovers some verbal autonomy, using it to call attention to the way her kin have let her down and caused her grief: “valda megir Gjúca / míno bölví” [the kin of Gjúki caused my grief] (st. 20). After praising Sigurðr, Guðrún’s lament shifts the focus to the Gjúkungs’s shameful killing of Sigurðr: “þeir munu þér baugar at bana verða, er þú Sigurði svarðir eiða” [the rings will be the death of you, since you swore oaths to Sigurðr] (st. 21), reverberating with Brynhildr’s earlier accusations of oath-breaking, but Guðrún’s subversion in this lament is more subtle than Brynhildr’s shocking statements.

In *Guðrúnarkviða I*, Guðrún is still a young woman, encountering her first sorrow of many in her life, and she has not yet developed her

later autonomous identity. In contrast to Guðrún's self-perception as weak in her earlier scenes, the image of her in *Hamðismál* st. 5, after her dispatch of her two last sons to avenge their sister (see Larrington, [Chapter 7](#), this volume), is much stronger, and she states: "Einstœð em ec orðin sem ösp í holti, / fallin at frændom sem fura at qvisti" [I have become alone, as an aspen-tree on the rocky hill / in the forest, my kin cut off as a fir-tree's branches]. The imagery echoes her lament in *Gkv I*: the young widow as small as a leaf, whose identity was defined by her family and her attachment to a man, has now emerged as a sorrow-weary woman and an independent matriarch, likening herself to a full-grown tree. She is uncompromising and powerful, in control of her own life and others, but has eliminated her male-kindred by her consuming vengeance. As Larrington has noted, Guðrún's self-perception is reminiscent of that of Egill in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*: following the death of his sons, he composes the grief-poem *Sonatorrek*, in which he laments the fact that the gods have stripped him of his family members, and he emphasizes in similar terms how he stands alone (1993, 174–181). In contrast to Egill, whose sons drowned, it is Guðrún herself, with her incitement speeches, who—as Hamðir reminds her—has caused the death of her sons and her own unhappiness. Ironically, the *hvöt*, a speech act normally considered appropriate for women, has been taken too far by Guðrún, since she is aware of the cost: the death of her last living relatives, her sons Hamðir and Sörli, as they indeed point out before embarking on their revenge mission. Guðrún first subverts the female lament role and then the inciter role, highlighting its destructive consequences on a monstrous scale.

Conclusion

Many of the heroic poems in the *Edda* are preoccupied with women. They explore their roles and power, revealing distinct attitudes and anxieties about women's functions, while they largely construct images of subversive women who contrast with ideal ones. Such images can be assumed to have been under debate both during the period of composition and manuscript compilation. I have analyzed some of the strategies that women use to maintain subjectivity and autonomy, and to subvert their gender roles in the legendary-heroic

society depicted in the poetry. The poems show women's autonomy and an independent subjectivity as crucial to them; women have the ability to use their voice to declare their own intentions by vows, very likely unavailable to them in the eyes of the constructed society of the poems as well as the real one that formed the audience, criticism of their family members and society at large through cursing or accusation, or indeed to refuse to speak when expected to, to remain silent when they ought to lament. My analysis has shown that many women in Eddic heroic poetry do not "act as other women" but use various strategies to assert their autonomy and independence, subverting traditional female gender roles and challenging the patriarchal order by taking power for themselves.²⁹

Notes

1. For discussions of lament, see Sävborg ch. 6; Clover 152–153; Harris 1983, 2000. For discussion about whetting, see Heller 98–122; Jochens 1996, chs. 7–8; Mundal 1994b, 3–11; Miller 1990, 212–213; 1983, 179–181; Anderson 421–440; Tolmie, 294–297; Jóhanna Katrín Friðriksdóttir 55–76.
2. On the problem of dating Eddic poetry, see Quinn 2012a, 2012b. In this chapter, I will follow Quinn's view that "[i]solating the historical period during which each poem may have been composed and first recited is ... of less importance than the vitality of the tradition across the generations, the earliest renderings of the heroic feats of the past apparently being memorized and performed again and again to new audiences, giving rise to new versions of events by new poets in succeeding generations, as well as the conservation of older poems through re-performance, probably within the same milieu" (2).
3. Reading "against the grain" is an approach, originally advanced by feminist literary theorists in the 1970s and '80s, which entails deconstructing the fundamental ideology, in this instance, a patriarchal social organization, that the narrator or text presents as normative (see e.g. Fetterley).
4. Searle 9. Austin actually categorized "intend" as a commissive, but as Searle, who refined and developed Austin's theories, points out, the illocutionary force of the utterance "I intend" is "to express intention" rather than "to intend."
5. Austin 14–24, in particular condition A.2 (14–15, 34–35). Also see Austin 40–47 for insincerities, which make speech acts "unhappy" (but not void).
6. "[T]al som besitter en rituell handlings kvaliteter" (italics in original). Habbe 2005, 121–122.
7. Habbe 2005, 157.
8. See e.g., *Skamma* st. 1 and *Brot* st. 2. A few *Íslendingasögur* depict the sworn-

brotherhood ritual (*fóstbræðralag*) in which the participants go under a strip of turf and mix their blood in the dirt. According to Miller, this practice, which the sagas represent as a formal “fictive”—as opposed to familial or blood—bond between two men, involving the vow to avenge the death of the other like real brothers, is nowhere present in contemporary sagas or Commonwealth law codes, suggesting that it was obsolete by that time (see 1990, 173). Another homosocial bond strengthened with a vow, the lord-retainer bond, derives from the Germanic *comitatus*. This practice, which Miller describes as carrying great symbolic and sacred weight, appears in both *konungasögur* and Snorri’s *Skáldskaparmál* ch. 53 and is described in detail in a medieval Norwegian law code (see 1990, 23–24; Snorri Sturluson, *Edda* ch. 80; “Hirðskrá,” ed. Keyser 422–423).

9. The word *eiðrofa* is also attributed to Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* ch. 32: “Öll ætt yður mun illa fara er þér eruð eiðrofa, ok munðir þú þat óglöggt er þit blönduðuð blóði saman, Sigurðr ok þú” [your entire family will fare badly for you are oath-breakers, and you did not remember clearly that you and Sigurðr mixed blood].
10. A frequent feature of female incitement speeches is the woman threatening to take the man’s position, relegating him to the female role (see e.g. Steinvör’s *hvöt* in *Þórðar saga kakala*) in *Sturlunga saga*, ed. Jón Jóhanesson 6), where she says her husband might as well take the keys to the pantry: “ek mun taka vápnin ok vita, ef nökkurir menn vili fylgja mér, en ek mun fá þér af hendi búrluklana” [I will take the weapons and see if anyone will follow me, but I will hand the keys to the pantry over to you]. It is worth noting that *Brot* depicts Brynhildr as the culprit for Sigurðr’s murder while *Skamma* emphasizes the Gjókungs’s greed for gold as their main motivation.
11. In *Brot* st. 4, Guttormr seems to be magically impelled to commit the murder as he is given specially prepared food to fortify him enough to carry out the killing, but Högni confesses the murder to Guðrún in st. 6. At the end of the poem, the prose narrator reflects on the different narrative traditions about who murdered Sigurðr, but asserts that whichever version is true, everyone agrees that “þeir svico hann í tryggð ok vógo at honum liggjanda ok óbúnom” [they treacherously betrayed him and attacked him when he was lying down and unarmed].
12. All Eddic citations are from ed. Neckel and Kuhn 1962.
13. This would then be when Sigurðr took from her the ring *Andvaranautr*, which he had first given her, and which later turns up on Guðrún’s finger in the river quarrel. Andersson terms this version the Norse tradition while, according to him, the German versions of the narrative either do not contain, or suppress, a prior betrothal (see Andersson 29, 48–49). For a recent discussion about narrative variation in the *Völsung*/*Gjókung* legend, see Quinn 2012b.
14. From the twelfth century onward, a union was legal according to canon law if the two conditions of *verba de futuro* (a couple’s pledge to each other to marry) followed by intercourse were fulfilled. According to Bjørn Bandlien, *Völsunga saga*’s representation of Brynhildr and Sigurðr’s vows of fidelity to each other followed by sexual congress constitutes a legally binding bond, making their daughter Áslaug legitimate (and Sigurðr a bigamist); this interpretation is supported by *Skamma* 68. For discussion, see Bandlien, 154–155, 253.

15. In *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr and the disguised Sigurðr only share a bed, but in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál*, they actually marry (ch. 48).
16. Andersson discusses the possibility that *hétumk* is “a wish rather than an act.” Given, however, that the verb *heita* means ‘to promise’ or ‘to vow’, and the noun *heit* means ‘a solemn promise’ or ‘a vow’—as in the fixed phrase *strengja heit* ‘to make a solemn vow’—Brynhildr’s intention, and thus the illocutionary force of her utterance, must be to make an oath when she promises she will have Sigurðr (cf. Sperberg-McQueen).
17. Else Mundal argues that in Norway women acted as witnesses (*eiðkonor*) for other women as a general rule, but the evidence seems inconclusive, and there is little indication that women enjoyed such privileges in Iceland (see 1994a, 598–599). Mundal’s argument is based on a law code from 1313, but it is not clear whether this was also an Icelandic practice or how old it was by the time it was recorded.
18. de Vries 327. Bandlien notes that the sources mentioning Vár or *várar* (the two mentioned above as well as *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*) are dated to ca. 1200 onward and argues that “the concept of the significance of mutual vows in love and betrothal may have been revived after courtly ideals became more widely known” (214).
19. See e.g., *Grágás*, Festapáttir §9 (ed. Finsen); see overview of betrothal and wedding proceedings in Ricketts 67–71. The idea of female consent in marriage was known in Iceland since at least the late twelfth century, but it first entered in law codes in 1275; thus it seems logical to infer that it might have been a contentious issue in the thirteenth century. The two ideas promoted by the Church, on the one hand, and secular authorities, on the other, might have affected the way the thirteenth-century audience interpreted the import of the betrothal and consummation in that tradition, *Völsunga saga*’s author advancing the latter’s agenda. For discussion about *verba de futuro* and the struggle between the Church and secular authorities with regard to parental vs. spousal consent and control over unions, see Bandlien 69–86. According to Agnes Arnórsdóttir (107–109) and Jenny Jochens, the practice of paternal/parental control continued long after the idea of female consent had been adopted into the legal framework; the two ideas were not mutually exclusive, and female consent did not mean that a woman was free to marry whomever she chose (see Jochens 1986, 142–176).
20. See e.g., Guðrún’s *skírsla* [ordeal] to prove she has not cheated on her husband Atli with Þjóðrekr in *Guðrúnarkviða III*; for discussion, see Quinn 2013. This finds a historical parallel in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsaga* ch. 16 (Sturla Þórðarson 14), where Hákon’s mother Inga successfully proves his royal paternity (she had been the deceased king’s concubine), as well as *Magnússona saga* ch. 26 in Snorri’s *Heimskringla*. A similar example is found in the *Spesar páttir* of *Grettis saga* (ed. Guðni Jónsson), where Spes swears the “ambiguous oath”; most critics consider this scene to be borrowed from the Tristan legend. The ordeal is a form of oath also performed by men, for example, in *Grettis saga* ch. 39 (although in the end Grettir does not perform the ordeal).
21. Fredrik Heinemann argues that when Brynhildr utters this vow, she knows that Sigurðr is already engaged to Guðrún and is thus unavailable; he regards this as a

- misogamous trick to stay single. Whether one agrees with this interpretation, the illocutionary force of the utterance is some form of binding pledge to her own will.
22. Although the two terms *at heitask* [to make a vow] and *at sverja eið* [to swear an oath] are separate terms, their illocutionary force is the same.
 23. In *Völuspá* st. 26, the gods break their vows with the giants, one of the main reasons for the onset of *ragnarök*; *Vsp* st. 39 describes *Náströnd*, where murderers, adulterers, and oath-breakers (*menn meinsvarna*) keep company with dragons and wolves and must wade through heavy streams, also recorded in Snorri's *Gylfaginning* ch. 52. Gunnlaugr Leifsson's *Merlínusspá* II.18 predicts the fall of a city due to its inhabitants' oath-breaking. For *eiðrofi* as a term of abuse, see e.g., *Grœnlendinga þáttur* ch. 4 (ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson 281), *Árna saga biskups* (ed. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir 108), and *Sverris saga* (ed. Þorleifur Hauksson 159, 244).
 24. *Kristinréttur Árna Þorlákssonar* 22–23 (adopted in 1275) warns against *eiðrof*, punishable with a fine (ed. Haraldur Bernharðsson). A similar code is found in *Frostapingslög* and King Sverrir's *Christenret* (ed. Keyser 1:152, 429). In *Thomas saga erkibyskups* ch. 32, Henry IV accuses Thomas à Becket of treason: “konungs eiðrofa oc sannprovaðan suikara” [oath-breaker to the king and proven traitor] (ed. Unger 208). The Latin original reads *periurum ac proditorem archipræsulem iucidarunt*; thus the word *eiðrofi* is here used to translate *periurum* [perjury].
 25. *Grágás*, *Baugatal* §2–3, *Víglóði* §15 (ed. Finsen).
 26. See Quinn 2012a, 2012b, and *Oddrúnargrátr* 10: “hét ek ok efndak” [I vowed and I kept it].
 27. “Þic skyli allir bíta ... Scríðiat þat skip, er und þér scríði ... rennia sá marr, er und þér renni ... Bítia þér þat sverð, er þú bregðir” [May all oaths sting you, ... May the ship you sail not glide forth, ... May the horse you ride not run, ... May the sword you wield not bite] (sts. 31–33).
 28. In *Völsunga saga* ch. 24, Brynhildr also predicts future events with regard to Sigurðr's marriage to Guðrún, but this scene is not preserved in Eddic poetry.
 29. I would like to thank Carolynne Larrington for her support in the writing of this chapter. Many thanks are also due to Judy Quinn, Grégory Cattaneo, Merrill Kaplan, Viðar Pálsson, and Dario Bullitta for their helpful and insightful comments.

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Introduction to Chapter 7

The Later Heroic Poems of the Edda

Atlakviða, *Atlamál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*
(*Lay of Atli*, *Greenlandic Poem of Atli*, *The Whetting of*
Guðrún, and *The Lay of Hamðir*)

Critical History

The last four poems in the Poetic Edda compilation in the Codex Regius manuscript treat the later career of Sigurðr's wife Guðrún. The first two poems relate the outcome of her second marriage, in which she is wedded against her will to Atli (Attila the Hun), and the death of her brothers Gunnarr and Högni. Both poems are said in the manuscript headings to be Greenlandic, though it seems likely that this attribution became attached to *Atlakviða* (The Lay of Atli) because it was already attached for good reason to *Atlamál* (The Poem of Atli). In both poems, Gunnarr and Högni journey to visit their brother-in-law Atli, despite the warnings sent by their sister that Atli has evil intentions; in *Atlakviða* his aim is to gain possession of Fáfnir's treasure, which has passed into their keeping after the death of Sigurðr, while *Atlamál* leaves his hostility to the brothers largely unmotivated. Högni's horrible death—his heart cut out of his living body, as also in *Atlakviða*—is here intended to wreak revenge on his wife for the miserable state of their marriage. Guðrún's revenge is merciless: she kills her sons by Atli and serves them to him to eat, though in *Atlamál* the final murder of her husband is delayed until Högni's son can come to aid his aunt. *Atlakviða* is a fast-moving, highly allusive account of terrible deeds, which passes no direct judgment on its uncompromising heroine; *Atlamál* is twice as long as the poem that precedes it, chronicling both the dramatic battle at

Atli's farmstead and its bitter aftermath in which recriminations fly between husband and wife.

The second set of poems begin with an identical scene: Guðrún urges her two sons by her third marriage, Hamðir and Sörli, to go on a mission to avenge their half-sister Svanhildr, Guðrún's daughter by Sigurðr. Svanhildr's husband, Iörmunrekkr, emperor of the Goths, the accompanying prose explains, has executed her; she has been trampled to death by horses for suspected adultery with his son Randvér, whom his father has hanged. In *Guðrúnarhvöt* (The Whetting of Guðrún), the focus of the poem remains with the mourning Guðrún once the brothers have ridden away; she utters a *tregróf* (chain of misery) (see Daniel Sävborg, [Chapter 4](#), this volume), chronicling her many sorrows as she prepares to commit suicide, finally to re-join her beloved Sigurðr.

Hamðismál (The Lay of Hamðir) follows Hamðir and Sörli after their mother's provocations. Invulnerable to the Goths' weapons, they wreak a terrible revenge on their sister's husband Iörmunrekkr but are themselves overcome when the mutilated king calls on his men to stone them—a fate they have brought on themselves by their murder of their half-brother Erpr, who had offered them his help in a riddling speech as they rode furiously away from their mother's home.

Scholarship on these final poems from 1955 to 1984 is listed and discussed in Harris 1985. Encyclopedia articles on the poems are found in Strayer and in Pulsiano. The German-language *Kommentar* (von See 2012) discusses all four poems, including their textual transmission, and the history of criticism with line by line annotations. Early twentieth-century discussions of the two Atli poems were largely concerned with the legend's relation to the material found in the Middle High German *Nibelunglied*, in which the deaths of Kriemhilt's [= Guðrún] brothers are recounted. In the German tradition, and in the related Old Norse *Þiðreks saga*, Kriemhilt / Grímhildr is responsible for the killings, avenging the death of her husband Sifrið / Sigurðr. *Atlakviða* has been identified as among the earliest poems preserved in the Edda; *Atlamál* is regarded as a later expansion of the material. While Dronke (1969) argues that *Hamðismál* is also likely to be relatively old, the *Kommentar* in contrast takes the view that the poem is dependent on *Guðrúnarhvöt* and the latter poem is not among the oldest of the Poetic Edda. Daniel Sävborg ([Chapter 4](#), this volume) calls into question the criteria for determining that those heroic poems which feature women mourning are more recent than those, like *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál*, which show

men and women taking revenge.

T. M. Andersson has investigated the relationship between the two Atli poems, concluding that the poet of *Atlamál* did indeed know *Atlakviða* in a form similar to the version preserved in the Codex Regius. Among the earlier articles on *Hamðismál*, Brodeur and Brady's discussion of the themes of brotherhood in the poem is still worth reading. The most influential discussion of all four poems in English is in Dronke 1969, which gives a clear account of the historical events distantly underlying the poems and the other poems in Old Norse that preserve the traditions of Gunnarr and Högni's deaths and the vengeance on Iörmunrekkr. Her editions of the poems, with their lively facing translations, rearrange some stanzas and have more emendations than current editorial fashion would encourage. Dronke's commentaries on the poems are sensitive and learned, while her literary interpretations are both persuasive and influential. Importantly, by comparison of *Hamðismál* with Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* and with the *lausavísur* of Torf-Einarr, she makes a strong case for an early date—around 900—for a version of the poem (204–217).

Relatively little has been written in English on the poems since Dronke. Notable exceptions are Shippey's discussion of the manuscript stanza order of *Hamðismál* and John Hines's interpretation of the same poem in terms of speech act and genre analysis, reading the Eddic poem beside *Ragnarsdrápa* and concluding, "each [is] individually consistent, but mutually thoroughly contrastive" (197). David Clark's two articles argue that the compiler of the Poetic Edda intended the final poems to stand as a warning against vengeance, and that the last poems of the compilation pick up the theme of Ragnarök from *Völuspá* at the beginning of the manuscript. Larrington 2009 considers the evidence for Svanhildr as a problematic stepmother-figure in a comparative context, while her 2011 account of lateral relations in the heroic poetry considers these four poems alongside the Helgi poems and investigates how sibling and affinal tensions produce the poems' drama. In the chapter that follows here, Larrington draws together the four last poems of the Codex Regius in an analysis that draws on theories of sacrifice, the anthropological concept of "the exchange of women," and the emotional calculus involved for Guðrún in deciding to send her last remaining sons to their deaths in avenging her daughter.

—Carolyn Larrington

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“I Have Long Desired to Cure You of Old Age”

Sibling Drama in the Later Heroic Poems of the Edda

Carolynne Larrington

Introduction

The current decade in medieval studies, both literary and historical, has brought what has been characterized as the “affective turn.” It problematizes our understanding of past emotions and feelings in the light of new research into biological and psychological universals, while remaining aware that, within what Barbara Rosenwein (2006) has characterized as “emotional communities”, emotion and behavior is historically contingent. What then can various kinds of texts and artefacts produced across medieval European society tell us about kinship and its conceptualizations, and what kinds of theoretical frameworks might be valid in reconstructing the implications of kin relationships in the pre-Christian, or imagined pre-Christian societies of a millennium ago? What can we know about how relatives behaved toward one another and how they felt about each other, or were expected to behave and feel according to the prevailing social norms? Where do literary scholars, historians, archaeologists, and philologists intervene in such large debates as biological essentialism versus social constructionism—what do we understand as “natural” within the family and what is produced by social conditioning? To open up, rather than to answer such questions, I discuss four texts that unsettle

profoundly our ideas about what is “natural” within the family and how we expect mothers to behave toward and feel about their children.

“Family drama” is ordinarily regarded as a critical/psychoanalytical term reserved for tragedy. In its archetypal form, the family drama centers on a son’s resolution—or failed resolution—of the Œdipus complex; it focuses then on parent–child relationships. Vertical relations are seen as crucial in tragedy; the working out of the kinship among Hamlet, his father, his mother and uncle, of Lear and Cordelia, of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Elektra, and Orestes. This emphasis accords with the interest in genealogy and lineage in the *Íslendingasögur*; by contrast, the heroic poems, as I have argued elsewhere (Larrington 2011), attend much more acutely to lateral relations: those among brothers, sisters, and affines (i.e., in-laws). Sometimes the conflict in these poems may involve frustrated affines—the rejected suitor who allies himself with his beloved’s brother to attack the successful suitor, a pattern typical of the Helgi poems in the Poetic Edda.

This chapter discusses four poems—the last four in the collection of Eddic poems in the Codex Regius manuscript. These poems have most recently been considered by David Clark in two articles (Clark 2005, 2007), in which he reads them against the ethos of revenge, and its apocalyptic effects on dynastic fortunes, particularly in the context of the manuscript’s compilation in late thirteenth-century Iceland. These poems occur only in this manuscript, though their content is paraphrased in prose in *Völsunga saga* and in the *Snorra Edda*. Two of these, *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál*, tell the same story from two rather different perspectives, and they feature both the conflict between brothers and their sister’s husband and the sister’s murder of her children by that same husband: so involving both vertical and lateral bonds. The second pair also deals with dramatic material: a mother’s—indeed that same mother’s—demand that her surviving sons effectively mount a suicide mission to avenge the death of their half-sister. This unusual calculus, one that appears to privilege revenge for a dead daughter over the survival of the last male offspring, triggers a review of family history that highlights the extremes of sibling and marital emotion (Jochens 147). The key concept I bring to bear on these poems is the anthropological principle of the exchange of women between social groups (Lévi-Strauss), of the trade in this “vile and precious merchandise” as Monique Wittig (89) terms women. As the anthropologist Gayle Rubin points out, unlike the other

commodities, “shells, words, cattle names, fish, ancestors, whale’s teeth, pigs, yams, spell, dances, mats, etc,” which pass between exchanging groups, women alone possess subjectivity, even if they often have no legitimate agency in the exchange (174). Female subjectivity is habitually ignored by patriarchy, or rather, in the terms popularized by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, it is abjected (see also Acker); it cannot be eliminated, and it has the propensity to return in potentially horrifying forms. Comparison of the Atli-material with recent readings of the twelfth-century French poem *Philomena* illuminates possible interpretations of Guðrún’s revenge on Atli, while further exploration of cultural understandings and the inter-relatedness of child-bearing, child-killing, and sacrifice draws on the work of Walter Burkert and Nancy Jay.

Guðrún and Atli

The poems *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál* continue the history of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir from earlier in the Codex Regius. Guðrún was married to Sigurðr the dragon-slayer, and mostly through the machinations of Brynhildr, Sigurðr’s former lover, her brothers Gunnarr and Högni brought about her husband’s death. After this, and despite her professed reluctance and prophetic knowledge of the likely outcome, Guðrún is married off by her brothers, with her mother’s agreement to Atli, king of the Huns, Brynhildr’s brother. The two poems are very different in likely age, style, and delineation of family relations. *Atlakviða* is regarded as one of the oldest poems of the Edda, heroic in its ethos and highly stylized in its form and diction. *Atlamál*, thought to be later, is domestic and more expansive in its retelling of the narrative. Both poems are, however, described in the manuscript as being from Greenland: *grœnlensku*, although it seems extremely unlikely that *Atlakviða* has any connection with the Norse colony. The ascription of a Greenlandic stage of transmission to *Atlamál* is more plausible: I shall address the implications of this attribution later.

Atlakviða opens at the court of the brothers Gunnarr and Högni in a high-status Continental hall (a *valhöll*, like Atli’s). A messenger has come from Atli with an invitation to visit him and a promise of rich reward. The brothers scent an ulterior motive; why should they want treasure when they possess the riches of their former brother-in-law,

the dragon's hoard? Högni notices that the ring which the messenger bears as a token has a wolf's hair twisted around it:

Hvat hyggr þú brúði bendo,
þá er hon ocr baug sendi,
varin váðom heiðingia?
hygg ec, at hon vornuð byði. (st. 8)

[What do you think the lady meant when she sent us a ring / wrapped in the coat of the heath-wanderer? / I think that she was giving us a warning.]¹

Significantly, Högni (assuming he is the speaker here) identifies his sister Guðrún as *brúði* “a bride”; as in the earlier poems involving these siblings and Sigurðr, Guðrún's chief significance to her brothers is as a woman to be exchanged with other elite families as a bride who cements alliances. Her marriage is intended to compensate for the unfortunate treatment of Atli's sister Brynhildr among the Gjúkungs, who was deceived into a disappointing marriage and ultimately chose to commit suicide (on the exchanges of women between the two clans, see Quinn 2009, and forthcoming; Larrington 2011).

In *Atlamál*, the scene is laid somewhat differently. Vingi (the messenger) rows over the fjord to what seems to be a collectively owned farmstead. The gifts he brings are hung on the hall-pillar, and the invitation to Atli's home is tendered on the part of the *husfreyja*—Guðrún is envisaged as the mistress of a household rather than a traded bride. Gunnarr and Högni live together with their wives and children on this farmstead, while Högni's wife Kostbera knows her sister-in-law well, it seems, at least well enough to recognize Guðrún's style and capability in carving runes. Högni's sister, the *björt* “radiant lady” (st. 11/4) has not sent the message, Kostbera claims—or else their import has been distorted.

In *Atlakviða*, the brothers set out for Atli's home apparently unaccompanied, for when they enter the hall, Guðrún reproaches them for not having brought a troop of warriors with them. The interchanges here play markedly on the sibling relationship; Guðrún (characterized as their *systir*) quickly notes the arrival of both her brothers in the hall and cries out to her *bróðir* Gunnarr that he is betrayed. In his response, Gunnarr addresses her as sister, noting, “Seinað er nú, systir” [It is (too) late now, sister] (st. 17) to summon the rest of the clan group; the brothers' fates are sealed. The interchanges here also clearly foreground sibling relations as the old bonds of blood begin to reassert themselves. The action moves swiftly forward; the brothers are seized, and Gunnarr announces that he will

not reveal the hiding place of the treasure until he sees Högni's heart in his hand. After some blackly comic play with the substituted heart of a slave, Högni is killed, and Gunnarr triumphantly announces that *now* he will never tell. He is solemnly led forth to the snake pit where he meets his end. The instigation of fratricide in this way, whether direct or indirect, is very rare in Eddic material; only Sinfjötli (in *Völsunga saga* ch. 8) cheerfully murders his half-siblings when they threaten to give him and his father away. It is far more usual for brothers to kill their sister's husbands, for being a brother-in-law is a dangerous position.

In *Atlakviða*, Högni's son (*erfivörðr Höгна*) (st. 12) had stayed at home, bidding good bye to his father and uncle; in *Atlamál*, by contrast, the men of the immediate kin-group, Gunnarr, Högni, Högni's two sons Snævarr and Sólarr, and Kostbera's brother Orkningr, all journey together to Atli's home. They form a strong male clan-group, including, notably, a loyal affine in Orkningr. Crossing back over the fjord, they come to Atli's *bær*, his farmstead inherited from his father Buðli. As Vingi admits his treachery, they kill him; Atli and his men rush to the fence (*garðr*), quickly arming themselves. Unlike the Guðrún of *Atlakviða* who watches powerlessly as her brothers are murdered, the Guðrún of *Atlamál* recalls her youth as a warrior-woman. Throwing off her necklaces, her feminine accoutrements, she seizes a sword and runs to fight side-by-side with her brothers, nephews, and brother-in-law. Her instant reversion from membership of her marital family to her natal family speaks to the social anxieties identified by Zoe Borovsky (2002) as produced by the woman's role in exchange situations; that the mediation fails and the woman's *blandinn* "mixed" loyalties become a vulnerable spot in the formerly *heill* "unified" male kin-group. Moreover, Guðrún fights effectively—soon she has killed two of Atli's brothers, and the *börn Gjúka* ("the children of Gjúki," male and female) (st. 52) form an impressive fighting unit. They are overcome by force of numbers, but by the end of the battle, Kostbera's boys and brother are dead. That these three are characterized by their relationship with their mother and sister is significant, for just as Kostbera loses brother and sons, despite her prophetic warnings, so too will Guðrún's brothers and sons die, through a different kind of agency.

Atli complains vigorously to his wife about the death of his brothers, and the couple fall into an undignified wrangling about each other's behavior toward their family. Atli brings up the death of Brynhildr; Guðrún alleges that he has murdered her mother and

starved her cousin to death. In this poem, the torture and killing of Gunnarr and Högni are not motivated by the treasure—indeed it is never mentioned—but by a sadistic desire to hurt Guðrún “at kløcqví Guðrún” (st. 58). The rancor and score-settling here are different from the icy dignity and cruel authority displayed in *Atlakviða*; in *Atlamál*, we see the claustrophobic tensions generated in a loveless marriage. As Theodore Andersson has noted in comparing the domesticity of *Atlamál* to the heroic excesses of *Atlakviða*, we have unusual access to the private emotions of the characters in this poem: “We view the characters in the guise of ordinariness rather than in the ecstasies of ideology” (199).

If Guðrún stands helplessly by in *Atlakviða* as her brothers are killed (though she utters a curse Atli would have done well to heed), her revenge is both swift and clandestine. As Atli returns from the snake pit, she is standing outside with a golden cup, which she offers in a formal greeting ritual. Her enigmatic remark that she will now serve him *gnadda niflfarna* “little creatures gone into darkness” (st. 33) obscures what she has done; revelation is postponed until Atli and his Huns have gathered in the hall, drunk their ale, and eaten their *ölkrásir* “ale-appetizers” (st. 35). Now Atli can be publicly shamed, told his *níð* with the revelation of a macabre recipe:

Sona hefir þinna, sverða deilir,
hiörto hrædreyrug við hunang of tuggin;
melta knáttu, móðugr, manna valbráðir
eta at ölkrásom, oc i öndugi at senda. (st. 36)

[Your own sons’—sharer-out of swords—hearts, corpse-bloody, you are chewing up with honey, you are savouring, proud lord, human flesh, eating it as ale-appetizers and sending it to the high-seat.]

Trading heart for heart, the boys’ offal recalling the unquivering heart of Högni, recently cut from his living body and displayed on a *biöð* “platter” to Gunnarr, Guðrún’s revenge strikes immediately at the center of Atli’s lordship: his relationship to his men. The Huns groan aloud when they hear how they are implicated in the act of cannibalism, and the high-status guests *i öndvegi* “in the high-seat” are also shamed, those whom Atli favored with the choicest food, that which the lord is eating himself. Thus, as Ursula Dronke (28) rightly observes, “Guðrún defiles Atli both as a father and as a king.” The actual killings take place offstage, but the pathos of the children’s deaths is carefully evoked by Guðrún’s decription for Atli of what he will never see again: his boys coming, when he calls them to his knee,

from the aristocratic pursuits connected with the ownership of horses. Everyone in the hall—the reference to the *börn Húna* plays on the memory of the lost children—weeps, except for Guðrún. Unlike in the earlier poems on the death of Sigurðr, where her weeping was a contested domain, the poet observes that the mother never weeps for her two children. Swiftly Guðrún brings down the curtain on the drama, warning the house-servants and loosing the dogs after she has stabbed Atli in their marital bed and set fire to the hall. The final stanza of *Atlakviða* returns Guðrún to the status of bride once again, but a “brúðr í brynio /brœðra at hefna” [a bride in a mail shirt to avenge her brothers] (st. 43), resolving the tension between wifeliness and sisterliness which has been at stake from the poem’s opening. Guðrún has proved where her loyalties lie—still with her birth family, her brothers, despite their killing of her first husband and her exchanged status. Though there was an erotic attraction between husband and wife in the past as st. 40 suggests, the products of that union, her children, are no more than tender young animals ready for eating. Coldblooded rage and an exultant joy in humiliation are the dominant emotions here.

If the pathos of the child-killing in *Atlakviða* is carefully modulated, it is given free rein in *Atlamál* where every last drop of emotion is wrung from the scene: “the killing of the children is even more horrible in *Atlamál*’s mundane surroundings and realistic detail than in the swift and stylized account of *Atlakviða*,” as Vésteinn Ólason comments (169). Once the brothers are dead, Atli dangerously taunts Guðrún, while she laments their childhood sibling solidarity. Ominously she warns, punning on the word for inheritance [*erfð*], that Atli’s murders will have a legacy, *erfð eptir* (st. 69). Thus, Guðrún’s reprisals are undertaken in cold blood and unfold more slowly and deliberately than in *Atlakviða*. An ale-feast is prepared *at erfa brœðr sína* “to honor the brothers” (st. 75), but the poet warns that *svorfon ofmicla* “great turmoil” (st. 76) will come from this. Guðrún entices her little children to her [*loccaði hon lítila*] (st. 77), and they come willingly to the arms of their mother; bravely they ask what will happen to them. Their mother declares, brutally, that she will kill them, with the black quip “lyst váromc þess lengi at lyfia ycr elli” [I have long desired to cure you of old age] (st. 78). The children respond that she may murder them if she wishes, but her anger will not last as long as her regret—whether they are correct about this is discussed further below. Guðrún swiftly cuts both the throats of the brothers; the second pair of brothers slaughtered, as the children

themselves clearly perceive, in exchange for the first. Guðrún's treatment of the bodies recalls the baroque, impractical detail of *Völundarkviða* sts. 24–25: she mixes the children's blood with Atli's drink, has their skulls shaped into drinking bowls, and roasts their hearts on a stick, and she gives the hearts to Atli, claiming that they are calf-hearts. The imagery of young animals, so subtly used in *Atlakviða*, re-appears in Guðrún's lie, and the accretion of detail here detracts from the realism of the scene.

Unlike the speedy resolution of *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál* drags out the marital recriminations for many more stanzas until another son of Högni, Hniflungr, appears in order to aid Guðrún in stabbing Atli—leaving him alive enough for further dialogue. Guðrún once again counterpoints the private domestic hell she and Atli have made for themselves with her nostalgic memories of her childhood and young adulthood, first with her brothers, then with her brothers and husband, before the bond between brothers and brother-in-law was poisoned by the arrival of Atli's sister in their lives. Thus, as Andersson suggests, *Atlamál* “promotes a new access to what the characters are really thinking, not just what they refuse to admit they are thinking” (199).

The Exchange of Women and Maternal Sacrifice

The woman exchanged in marriage, as Guðrún is, to seal a peace-settlement between feuding groups is a familiar figure in Germanic tradition. In *Beowulf* alone, we find the cases of Hildeburh and Freawaru; the alliance that Freawaru symbolizes breaks down very quickly, before any children can be born of the union. The exchange of women depends crucially on women's reproductive capacity; the birth of children to the new couple incarnates the new accord. If that offspring dies, so too may the peace agreement. And, conversely, if the peace agreement is violated, this risks, but does not necessarily entail, the death of the children.

In the Finnesburh story, we can see this principle in action: the peace agreement is broken by the Frisians' attack on the Danes and the son of Hildeburh and Finn dies in the consequent battle. The woman's kin, the Danes, destroy in retaliation for the attack the

symbol of accord, born from the exchange. Even if he shares his funeral pyre with his maternal uncle, the death of Hildeburh's son signals that the relationship forged by Hildeburh's marriage is broken beyond repair. Looking further afield, the death of the child of Branwen and the king of Ireland, cast alive into the fire by his maternal half-uncle Evnissyen in the second Branch of the *Mabinogi*, triggers a fresh round of fighting that brings both Ireland and Wales to ruin (ed. Ford 69–70).

In these examples from the British Isles, it is the women's kindred who destroy the symbol of union. What is exceptional about Guðrún is not just that she is a vocal and reluctant peace-weaver, whose presence unleashes in her husband's psyche prophetic dreams about the disaster of their marriage, while her prophecies give even her mother appalled pause for thought (see *Guðrúnarkviða II*). Rather, it is that she herself kills the children whose mixed blood should have sealed the union. The poets ask, where does a woman's loyalty lie? It depends on how much—or whether—she loves her husband, and what account has been taken of her subjectivity in the exchange. Vésteinn Ólason comments (170–171), in his analysis of Þórdís's conflict of loyalties in *Gísla saga*, “Loyalty towards a brother could not and should not eliminate a woman's loyalty towards her own children. The morality of *Gísla saga* comes close to the morality of *Atlakviða* but stops at this. However, we can hardly be sure that *Atlakviða* condones Guðrún's killing of her sons.” We are indeed hardly sure the killings are condoned, but we are equally hardly sure that the killings are condemned (*pace* the arguments in Clark 2005). Across the two poems, Guðrún is depicted uncritically, mostly described with epithets that emphasize her strength and resolution, though, as Vésteinn Ólason also notes, exactly in the context of the child-cannibalism in *Atlakviða* she is characterized as *afkár dís* “terrible supernatural female”. In *Atlamál*, the word *afkár*, perhaps in deliberate recall of the other poem (see Andersson 1983, 2003; Meli 2005), is used by Guðrún herself to warn Atli that if he thought her behavior was *afkár* before the kinslaying, now it will be even worse.

Mothers killing their children are rare in western myth and legend, if we leave aside the infanticide of newborns. The closest parallel to Guðrún's revenge on Atli is the archaic myth of Philomela, Tereus, and Procne (Burkert 179–185; see also Dronke 70). Here Tereus's rape and mutilation of his wife's sister is avenged by the sisters' killing and cooking Procne's son Itys, after which all the protagonists metamorphose into birds. Significantly, Tereus's offense is also

committed against his wife's sibling. Ovid's retelling in the *Metamorphoses* particularly emphasizes the distortion of kin-relations: Philomela's last utterance before Tereus cuts out her tongue, "Father," is balanced by Itys's final cry of "Mother, mother!", which Procne weighs against Philomela's inability now to utter the word "Sister": "Quam vocat hic matrem, cur non vocat illa sororem?" [Though he calls me mother, why can she not call me sister?] (VI: 633). This myth was retold in a twelfth-century poem, *Philomena*, sometimes ascribed to Chrétien de Troyes. In a thoughtful discussion of its sexual politics, E. Jane Burns argues that, "Progne's barbaric meal recasts the narrative of unfaltering maternal love that focuses traditionally on the mother who guarantees male patrimony and the husband's legal rights to possess offspring" (130–131). In an article about the same poem, in which she explores the distinctions between child-killing by men and child-killing by women in western tradition, Peggy McCracken (70) notes how:

a father's right to his children is regarded as a legal right, an ownership conferred by an active engendering. ... By contrast, the mother's relationship with her child is that of a caregiver, a guardian, a body: it is seen as a bond, not a right. These ways of describing parental ties do not reveal a truth about essential relationships; rather, they participate in a corporeal rhetoric that maps cultural values onto gendered roles in procreation.

Fathers thus have the cultural right to kill their children, usually in a sacrificial context. Mothers, at least in Aristotelian thought, simply provide matter for making the child, as if it were "cooking" the fetus in the womb until it is ready to be born (Laqueur 25–62). A mother's instinct to love and protect her child is, in some medieval analyses, not morally-based, for even irrational she-animals will fight for their cubs. Rather mother-love is "natural" and automatic, where the father's relation to his child is rational and thus quite variable (Vecchio 123–125). In Old Norse society, the father grants his offspring social existence; he either accepts a new baby into the family and names it or rejects it and orders its exposure (Hansen ch. 2). In such cases, mothers, often assisted by female kindred, work, usually successfully, to circumvent the child's death. And Norse fathers also sacrifice their sons to the gods; Hákon jarl sacrifices his son to the mysterious female figures Þórgerðr *hörgabrúðr* and her sister in order to obtain victory in battle in *Jómsvíkinga saga* (ed. Blake 36, 38), a story also mentioned by Snorri in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, without the reference to Þórgerðr (ed. Bjarni Aðalbarnarson I, 286; see also Ström

50). In *Ynglinga saga* ch. 25, based on *Ynglingatal* st. 13, Snorri recounts how the Swedish king Aun sacrificed a whole succession of sons to keep himself alive, while the death of Baldr can also be read in these terms, as a sacrifice by and to Óðinn (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson I, 47–49; Harris 1994; Jay 2007). Even in Iceland, a certain Hallsteinn is said in one version of *Gísla saga* to have sacrificed his son in order to obtain a huge sixty-ell tree trunk for his hall-pillars (ed. Finnur Jónsson, 54n). Dronke (16) astutely comments that Guðrún “sacrifices her own flesh to the perfection of revenge,” an observation that I now explore.

We do not find examples of women performing sacrifice in Old Norse. Female figures can receive sacrifice, though: Freyja is gratified by Óttar’s assiduous sacrifice to her in *Hyndluljóð*. More relevantly, the feast of *dísablót* is celebrated during the winter, during which time, according to Snorri, extrapolating from *Ynglingatal* st. 16, the *dísir* gladly receive king Aðils, who falls from his horse (ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson I, 56–59). As Judy Quinn has pointed out, the *dísir* clearly intervene in this poem in order to disrupt the patriarchal succession (pers. comm.). The poet’s choice of the term *dís* in *Atlakviða* then, in the phrase *afkár dís*, may well point to Guðrún’s anomalous role as a quasi-sacrificer, one who enforces her will through the killing of high-born male victims, kings in waiting. In sacrificing cultures, as Nancy Jay argues, women of child-bearing age cannot—indeed must not—sacrifice, for sacrifice functions as a sign of incorporation or belonging to a patriarchal lineage, a ritual that counter-balances the problematic condition of having been born of a woman. Unlike childbirth, sacrificial killing is “deliberate, purposeful, ‘rational’ action, under perfect control. Both birth and killing are acts of power, but sacrificial ideology commonly construes childbirth as the quintessence of vulnerability, passivity and powerless suffering,” (Jay 294).

“Unsex me here,” Lady Macbeth cries as she claims she would metaphorically sacrifice her child—“have pluck’d [her] nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out”—to gain political power and resolution for her husband (Act I, sc. V; Act I, sc. VII). So too Guðrún transforms herself from the child-bearer, vulnerable, passive, powerless, and suffering, as Jay has it, to take on the role of sacrificer. In so doing, she achieves more than a personal revenge. When a mother sacrifices, she strikes at the heart of patriarchy and lineage, undoing both literally and metaphorically her own maternity and the alliance that her exchanged body sealed. As Burns notes of Progne’s

infanticide,

Progne's act, cast as a message to her savage husband, might read less as a mother's senselessly brutal infanticide than a move on the part of a complicitous procreator to take back the child she gave in birth. It is almost as if, in killing Itys, Progne unravels the threads of time, reversing the course of past events to a moment before the birth of her child, a moment perhaps even before her marriage. (151)

In the exchange-of-women, "in which women do not have full rights to themselves" (Rubin 177), the woman's subjectivity, her position as an agent within her own life, is abjected in the Kristevan sense. Patriarchy cannot afford to take account of how the "vile and precious merchandise" views herself; what counts is her capacity to make new men. The exchange reaches its full meaning in maternity: the production of sons who unite the two groups, but in Guðrún's story, that abjected subjectivity returns to assert female agency through the physical destruction of the mediating group, in a calculated assault on the patriliney. David Clark's identification of Guðrún as masquerading in a Butlerian sense, as performing and theatricalizing her actions, confirms the vital importance of gender versus sex in this act of unmothering (2005, 192; see also Acker).

Guðrún's savagery is dignified in *Atlakviða* by "Othering" her children, envisaging them as sacrificial animals, *gnadda niflfarna*. The poet draws on the imagery of sacrifice, the ceremonial framing of the feast after Gunnarr's slaying, to imbue Guðrún with a terrible agency, acting on both family and tribe. What Walter Burkert terms the "unspeakable sacrifice," infanticide or symbolic infanticide in Greek ritual, lies behind Guðrún's action; that she then flings herself into the sea, which apparently rejects her, is a recurrent closing motif in Greek myth related to this kind of religious practice (Burkert 176–178, 282). These sacrificial implications are confirmed by the ending of *Guðrúnarkviða* II, a little earlier in the Codex Regius, in which Atli's dreams about the uprooting of *teina*, a frequent word for the twigs used in Norse ritual, and of eating the hearts of hawks and the corpses of dogs, are interpreted thus by Guðrún: "Þar muno seggir um söeing doema / oc hvítinga höfði nøema" [That means men will discuss sacrifice and cut off the heads of white (sacrificial) beasts]. The sacrificial creatures are imagined as white, pure, and fit for ritual slaughter here, in contrast to the children's designation as *Niflungar* "the dark ones" in *Guðrúnarhvöt* st. 12. Guðrún seems then already to foresee the role that the "unspeakable sacrifice" will play in working

her will.² These associations are active in *Atlakviða* and its immediate contexts in the Codex Regius; they do not transfer to *Atlamál*. The transposition of the grand mythic drama to a domestic, perhaps Greenlandic setting, as Clark notes, in a comment that invokes Burkert's discussion of *ananke* in narratives of sacrifice, makes "Guðrún's vengeance appear the action of one inspired less by necessity than by spite" (2005, 189).

The sacrificial animal is shared and consumed in the sacrificial feast, binding the patriline together. But for Atli, eating his own children does not imbue him with the power of the god; rather it pollutes him utterly. In the Norse cultural sphere, consuming tabooed flesh is a *níð*-accusation, as evidenced by Guðmundr's claim in the Helgi Hundingsbani *sennur* that Sinfjötli has eaten corpses. Atli has allowed into his body something doubly unclean; not just dead human meat, but meat that is metonymic of his own engendering power, now forever lost to him; the end product of a system in which "marital debts are reckoned in female flesh," as Rubin terms it (182). Dronke rightly observes that Guðrún defiles Atli as both a father and a king, while Clark sees her behavior as "a form of subversive parody of her role as wife and queen" (Dronke 28; Clark 2005, 193). Guðrún's action then speaks to some profound and widespread anxieties about women. These two poems offer a terrifying glimpse into the psyche of the exchanged woman who has not accepted her fate as a patriarchal commodity, partly answering Luce Irigaray's question, "What if these 'commodities' refused to go to market?" (1985, 196). But they also unsettle fundamental ideas of the woman as natural care-giver, provider, and nurturer. Women *should* feed and care for their families and households. Category confusion perverts the "natural" in the direction of patriarchal paranoia about its own vulnerability: what is my wife feeding me? what is she doing with my children? can I safely fall asleep in her arms? The final "murder in marital bed," as Preben Meulengracht Sørensen (253–255) characterizes the thematically related affinal killing in *Gísla saga*, ends both the relationship and exchange in the place where the children were conceived, erasing the initial reproductive acts and the possibilities for their reiteration in the birth of new children to the exchanged woman and her hated husband.

That the version of the story of Atli's death preserved in *Atlamál* seems to be imagined as taking place in Greenland is suggested in part by the landscape, but most particularly by Högni's assumption that Kostbera's dream of a bear refers to a *hvítabjörn* "white bear"; a

blizzard coming from the east seems also to suggest Greenlandic conditions (Dronke 107–111). Although the poem may not have originally been composed in Greenland, as the reference to the Danish Limfjord in st. 4 implies, it may have been transmitted to and within the colony and thence back to Iceland where the compiler of the Codex Regius encountered it (see further von See 7: 387–390). Both Jonathan Grove (2009) and Eleanor Barraclough (2009) have recently shown how Greenland seems, for writers in Iceland, to have been both familiar as a Norse colony and also profoundly Other, a place where the supernatural was closer at hand than at home, an *unheimlich* territory where hauntings and unnatural behavior could easily be imagined. Guðrún's actions are not simply aberrant; their monstrosity operates in the sphere of J. J. Cohen's concept of *extimité*, an intimate alterity that brings terror into the home but also heralds wider social dislocation and breakdown (1999, ix, 94). For as Jay (293) observes, "when a form of social organization is dependent on sacrifice for its identification and maintenance, it can also be lost by failure to sacrifice or endangered by improper sacrifice." Guðrún strikes not just at her husband and sons or the household, but at the whole patriliney to which her boys were assimilated. Grove (32) notes that other Greenland-set stories "dramatize the hardship and claustrophobia of life at the edge of Norse cultural life, as seen from Iceland. They articulate a medieval Icelandic discourse on marginality and isolation, transferred to distant shores reassuringly far from Iceland itself." It is not surprising, then, that the scene for the most appalling intrafamily crime should be imagined as laid in Greenland, in the kind of claustrophobic farm-household that appears in the Greenland sagas; or that this *extimate* space could be used to think about how families can turn on one another, emotionally, verbally, and physically. The absence of other visible members of the household—though Atli clearly has men to execute the killing of Högni—concentrates the horror. It has been suggested that the Greenland label attached to *Atlakviða* is a copy-ist's error, imported from *Atlamál*. Error it may be, but not perhaps a mechanical one. Although we can hardly imagine a *Myrkviðr* in treeless Greenland, the savagery of the plot may fit with the late thirteenth-century view taken in Iceland of their Greenlandic neighbors, distancing the horror of the Atli material from the feats of Icelandic ancestors recounted earlier in the Edda.

Guðrún, Hamðir, and Sörli

Failing to drown in the sea when she seeks annihilation after the “unspeakable” sacrifice, Guðrún is washed up on another shore, where she marries a third husband, king Iónakr, and bears him two sons. The action of the next poem, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, begins when this new set of sons has grown to adulthood. Guðrún had raised Svanhildr, her daughter by Sigurðr at Iónakr’s court also; somewhat older than Hamðir and Sörli, she is given in marriage to the notoriously cruel Iörmunrekkr, king of the Goths. The prose preceding *Guðrúnarhvöt* blames Bicci, Iörmunrekkr’s evil counsellor, for claiming that Iörmunrekkr’s adult son Randvér has begun an affair with his new stepmother. Iörmunrekkr has his son hanged and his new wife trampled to death by horses (see Larrington 2009). As *Guðrúnarhvöt* and the poem that follows it in the manuscript, the final poem *Hamðismál*, open, Guðrún reproaches her sons Hamðir and Sörli with having forgotten their sister and her terrible fate (*Ghv* st. 2; *Hm* st. 3). *Guðrúnarhvöt* st. 4 makes an explicit comparison with Guðrún’s dead brothers:

Urðoa iþ glíkir þeim Gunnari,
né in heldr hugðir, sem var Högni;
hennar myndoð iþ hefna leita,
ef iþ móð ættið minna bræðra
eða harðan hug Húnkonunga.

[You haven’t become like Gunnarr and his brother, nor any the more been brave, as Högni was; you would have tried to avenge her, if you’d had the temperaments of my brothers or the fierce spirit of the kings of the Huns.]

Guðrún’s opening gambit pitches her sons against the ideal of her lost brothers, but Hamðir ripostes with a reminder about the complexity of her past dealings with her siblings, reminding her that she did not praise those brothers when they murdered her first husband, Sigurðr, stabbing him in the marital bed (Meulengracht Sørensen 256–257). Nor had her revenge against Atli brought satisfaction: “Urðo þér bræðra hefndir / slíðrar oc sárar er þú sono myrðir” [Vengeance for your brothers was wounding and painful to you when you murdered your sons] (st. 5). Hamðir is unsparing in his estimation of his mother’s killing of his half-brothers as murder; in pragmatic terms, he also notes that, had these brothers been alive, they could all together have set out to attack Iörmunrekkr, perhaps with a better chance of

success. Though the brothers predict that revenge for Svanhildr will result in an *erfi* “memorial feast” for all three of Guðrún’s children—and implicitly perhaps for the earlier unmourned sons—they ride off to exact vengeance on their erstwhile brother-in-law.

Hamðismál follows the brothers on their journey, narrating how they foolishly kill their half-brother Erpr on the way, failing to understand his riddling offer of help. Passing the rotting body of their sister’s stepson-lover on the gallows, they come to the court of Iörmunrekkr, where they maim, but cannot kill, the Gothic king before they are stoned to death at Óðinn’s behest. In *Guðrúnarhvöt*, the narrative remains with Guðrún. The woman who never wept for her sons and brothers in *Atlakviða* now embarks on a more typical female speech act: tallying up her losses and wrongs, from the death of Sigurðr via the killing of her brothers to the death of Svanhildr. Significantly and despite the comments of Hamðir just a few verses earlier, Guðrún still regards the killing of her sons by Atli, her *húna hvassa* “sharp young cubs” (st. 12), as having apparently provided some compensation for her wrongs, some *bætr* for her *bölva*. The adjectives *slíðrar oc sárar* “wounding and painful” (st. 5), it should be noted, are not applied to the death of Atli’s children by their mother, but by Hamðir, who identifies all too closely with his doomed half-brothers. In stanzas 16–17, Guðrún launches a series of superlative comparisons of her grief, partly determined by alliteration. So her *harðastr* “worst” harm was the trampling of Svanhildr, the *sárastr* “most painful” experience of her life was the murder of Sigurðr, the *grimmastr* “most horrible” the death of Gunnarr, and the *hvassastr* “sharpest” the killing of Högni. Strikingly there is no room here for regret at the deaths of any of Guðrún’s sons, even though, in sending Hamðir and Sörli on their suicide mission, she has exterminated the last of her line. All that remains for her now is suicide on a funeral pyre, imitating the example of Brynhildr, so much earlier in the Poetic Edda. Her *búri svasa* “sweet sons”, invoked along with her brothers by Hamðir in *Hamðismál* (st. 10), in a phrase used by the narrator in *Atlakviða* (st. 38), whether her sons by Atli, her sons by Iónakr, Hamðir, and Sörli, or most likely all her male offspring, remain notably unmourned. In *Atlakviða*, no tear is shed for brothers or sons; here Guðrún’s tears may be triggered by the departure of her sons, as Clark (2005, 179n7) argues, but it is her first husband, her daughter, and her brothers, the ones whom she loved unconditionally, who are explicitly mentioned in her lament.

Conclusion

What kind of emotional calculus is this that weighs the lives of brothers, sons, and daughters and finds the sons expendable? Not a patrilineal-centered one, to be sure. Like Antigone, who notes that since her parents are dead, she can never replace her lost brother, Guðrún both problematizes and dramatizes the emotional value of different kin-relations, measured by the agency accorded to her in the exchanges in which she has participated. This conceptualization does not recognize the individual as possessing worth in him or herself, but rather as laying claim to identity by occupying a particular functional slot in the kin-system. Self-definition in terms of kin is a common trope in premodern theorization of identity, as “the point of orientation for the individual’s self-understanding,” as Meulengracht Sørensen comments (258). Thus, Beowulf identifies himself as Ecgtheow’s son and the sister’s son of Hygelac. As various sagas, in particular *Grettis saga*, confirm, the role of brother is also one that crucially defines the self. While Norse social norms expect sibling loyalty between brothers, the models for brother-sister relations are less clear from the saga or poetic corpus. As the cross-cultural psychologist Victor Cicirelli has noted for non-industrial societies, such relations tend only to be foregrounded in marital negotiations (74). For Gunnarr and Högni, Guðrún is expendable when it comes to the politico-social exchange of women in order to mend a feud that is only partly of her making. Even so, Guðrún becomes their avenger, prioritizing her sibling relationship over that with her husband and children, and her vengeful recourse against Atli destroys the wife-mother role that is a consequence of the exchange of women. The functions of food-provider of food and son-bearer are horribly conflated in Guðrún’s revenge, while the implications of Guðrún’s depiction as sacrificer in *Atlakviða* unsettle our reactions to what to us is “unnatural” behavior. The sacrificer role signals a strike at the heart of the patriliney and the systems by which it reproduces itself. The recasting of the story in domestic and psychological terms in *Atlamál* is scarcely more reassuring. When the flesh that is only partly Guðrún’s own flesh is re-incorporated in the hated body of the husband, the affective calculation that makes siblings closer than sons finds its epitome (Garbáty 1972). Female identity is forged by vertical and lateral blood ties; as one of the children of Gjúki, as sister, but emphatically not as bride. These poems retain their power because of

their ambivalences about the family; the claustrophobia of Atli's Greenlandic farm, the chilly dignity of Atli's grand hall in *Atlakviða*, and the threshold where Guðrún challenges her last remaining sons are all sets for extreme dramas of family relations, yet they nevertheless probe into fundamental questions about larger social organization.

Notes

1. All Eddic poetry cited from Neckel and Kuhn 1962; all translations from Larrington 1996 (except for hooked o replaced by ö).
2. If *Guðrúnarkviða II* is later than and dependent on *Atlakviða*, this suggests that its poet recognized the import of Guðrún's sacrificial behavior in the earlier poem. The author of *Völsunga saga* seems to have found Guðrún's interpretation too obscure, for he omits this part of her reply; see the discussion in *Kommentar* 4: 765–771.

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Introduction to Chapter 8

Grottasöngur (*The Song of Grotti*)

Critical History

Grottasöngur is only preserved as a quotation within *Skáldskaparmál*, part of Snorri's *Edda*, in one fourteenth-century vellum manuscript, GKS 2367 4to (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, known since the seventeenth century as the Codex Regius)¹ and in a later paper manuscript (Utrecht, University Library Ms. 1374, known as the Codex Trajectinus), which appears to have stemmed from the same exemplar as GKS 2367 4to. A further fourteenth-century manuscript of *Skáldskaparmál*, AM 748 II 4to (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum), quotes just the first stanza of the poem. The quotations come within these texts at the point in Snorri's survey of kennings for gold when he recounts the legend of King Fróði who set two slave girls to work without rest at a mill to provide him with abundant gold (in the poem, the slave girls identify themselves as giantesses). The girls Fenja and Menja retaliate against Fróði's harsh treatment of them by grinding out an army that ousts him from power. The legend generated numerous kennings for gold, which are attested in poems from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, Snorri himself deploying three of them in *Háttatal* (st. 43), the final section of his *Edda*.

While the poem may have suffered from a relative lack of scholarly attention during the twentieth century, partly because of its peripheral status *vis-à-vis* the canonical Codex Regius anthology of Eddic poems, it has nonetheless been edited with commentary no less than three times so far this century, by Klaus von See *et al.*, as part of the *Edda Kommentar* project (2000), by Ursula Dronke's one-time collaborator Clive Tolley (2008), and by Ursula Dronke herself (2011). The edition by Faulkes (within his edition of *Skáldskaparmál*) is recommended for its faithful rendering of the text of the Codex Regius of Snorri's *Edda*

(except in the few instances when little sense can be made of the manuscript text) and for its avoidance of speculative emendation. The commentaries of Tolley and Dronke are full of insightful observations about the poem and its background, and a full account of scholarship to date is provided in the detailed commentary by von See *et al.* Important contributions to the interpretation of the poem have been made by Joseph Harris (1990) and Vésteinn Ólason (2005).

Opinions about the date of the poem—which is likely to have been orally composed and transmitted until its eventual recording in the fourteenth century—are far from unanimous. Tolley considers the poem “late” and dates its composition to the twelfth century (2008, 31–32), as does Vésteinn Ólason, who ventures that the poem may not be much older than *ca.* 1200 (2005, 132). Dronke, who imagines the poem was devised “more than a hundred years, no doubt, after Eyvindr and—probably—Snæbjorn were dead” (151) opts for a broader date range, as do von See *et al.*, who propose the span between the lives of Eyvindr skáldaspillir in the tenth century and Snorri Sturluson in the thirteenth (857). In the chapter that follows, I examine the mythological motivation of the plot and, in particular, the way in which the morphing of the supernatural female speakers among giantess, valkyrie, *völva*, and *norn* can be understood as the protean personification of fate deployed in the poem in order to expose the unworthiness of Fróði to continue in his role as king. In the theatrically contrived space of a day and a night, the king’s fate is revised in view of his impolitic exploitation of the giantesses who might otherwise have greatly benefited his kingdom with the natural resources they are portrayed as controlling.

—Judy Quinn

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8

Mythological Motivation in Eddic Heroic Poetry

Interpreting *Grottasöngr*

Judy Quinn

In an article on *Grottasöngr* from 1990, Joseph Harris promoted the view of Eddic tradition as a form of intertextuality—each oral poem a kind of “concretation of tradition”—and advocated the exploration of, as he put it, “the principles of code coherence in the matrix form” revealed by each text (1990, 238–239). Some of Harris’s ideas were taken up by Vésteinn Ólason, who, in his 2005 analysis of the poem, considered its evident artistry as well as its relationship to other Eddic mythological poems. In this chapter, I take up the challenge posed by Harris to articulate in detail the codes underlying the poem’s composition by analyzing the way in which *Grottasöngr* switches between discursive modes and draws on conventions of Eddic staging, with particular attention to the degree to which mythological ideas are engaged in the work. The title of the poem, which like those of many other Eddic poems is a compound made up of a noun denoting the sound of human speech and the possessive form of a name (Quinn 1990), departs from the pattern in using the possessive form of the name of an inanimate object (the millstone Grotti) as the first component of the compound, rather than the personal names of the speakers, Fenja and Menja, who identify themselves as giantesses during the course of the poem. In this deflection from convention, we may perceive the principal conceit of the poem: the song of Grotti is the expression of supernatural power misapprehended by Fróði, the unwise king who interprets the sound of milling as the fulfillment of

his greedy exploitation of the mill-workers to mint him wealth. Accordingly, the song that he is unable to tune into refers both to the sound of the milling and the words chanted by the giantesses, the latter making explicit his political misprision. Being voiced by giantesses, the millstone's song is invested with considerable mythological portent, and an encounter between a king and his slaves is transformed in the poem into a clash between giant-kind (who are represented as controlling the natural resources of the world) and a human leader exposed for his folly in believing he could exploit their power without having first gained their favor.

The mode of the poem, the dramatization of an encounter between speakers from different mythological spheres, is one familiar from a number of Eddic poems, with *Vafþrúðnismál* (The Words of Vafþrúðnir) depicting a verbal contest between a god and a giant, *Hyndluljóð* (The Song of Hyndla) a fraught conversation between a giantess and a goddess, *Grímnismál* (The Words of Grímnir [Óðinn]) a wrathful declamation by a god in the presence of a human king and his son, and *Helreið Brynhildar* (Brynhildr's Ride to Hel) an argument between a rock-dwelling giantess [gýgr] and the legendary heroine Brynhildr Buðladóttir.² The poet of *Grottasöngur* has chosen the configuration of two giantesses and a king as the vehicle for his exploration of kingship in relation to supernatural patronage, the king (whose name ironically means "the wise or bountiful one"), unable to benefit from the beneficence offered by the giantesses because of his mythological ineptitude. Like King Geirröðr in *Grímnismál*, King Fróði is found wanting in terms of the cleverness expected of a king in being able to identify the true nature of those whom he encounters and, more pointedly, in terms of mytho-political etiquette: Fróði denies sleep to his exceptionally strong (though incognito) slaves just as Geirröðr denies the visiting (albeit disguised) god hospitality.

In terms of staging, there are clear parallels between the single scene of *Grottasöngur* and poems such as *Grímnismál*, where Óðinn delivers a long monologue that gradually reveals the god's identity to the doomed King Geirröðr, and *Helreið Brynhildar*, where a princess meets a hostile giantess on the road to Hel. Like *Helreið Brynhildar* and *Grímnismál*, *Grottasöngur* might be said to belong to the sub-genre of the retaliatory reminiscence, as gradually the import of who the speakers are—and the extent of their power and the depth of their antipathy—is revealed.³ In the case of *Grottasöngur* and *Grímnismál*, the addressee is doomed in listening; in *Helreið*, the gýgr's objections to Brynhildr's past behavior are scotched as her interruption—and indeed her

physical presence above ground—are terminated by Brynhildr’s declaration of her version of events. In addition to this style of staging, *Grottasöngur* also draws on the Eddic tradition of the trial, where a test of some kind is theatrically concluded in the encounter depicted by the poem. A test of one speaker’s wisdom is the most obvious manifestation of the convention, with the utterance of the dominant speaker ending at the point when the contestant’s fate is sealed: so it is with the giant Vafþrúðnir in *Vafþrúðnismál*, for instance, who cannot answer the disguised Óðinn’s terminating question, or in *Alvíssmál*, with the dwarf Alvið (“the all-wise one,” another name imbued with irony), whose otherwise extensive knowledge fails him in the crucial aspect of how long he can submit to questioning before night turns to day and he is turned to stone. Other kinds of trials emerge in Eddic encounters between mythological speakers and human figures, such as the trial of King Geirröðr’s hospitality in *Grímnismál*, and here in *Grottasöngur*, the trial of Fróði as a worthy king. As with Geirröðr’s king-ship, the reign of *Grottasöngur*’s legendary king cannot be identified with any historical specificity; indeed there are a considerable number of Fróði’s mentioned in the historical record whose biographies resonate with one or another aspect of the king presented in the poem.⁴ The poem in fact appears to avoid specificity of reign in its depiction of kingship in order to exploit the connotations of the name in all its legendary complexity.⁵

The revelatory dialogue of the poem begins *in medias res*, with only the sparest of narration, as is the convention in many Eddic poems. Two young girls (not yet identified as giantesses) arrive on the scene (st. 1):

“Nú erum komnar
til konungs húsa
framvísar tvær
Fenja and Menja.”
Þær ró at Fróða
Friðleifssonar
máttkar meyjar
at mani hafðar.⁶

[“Now we two fore-knowing ones, Fenja and Menja, have come to the residence of the king.” They are at Fróði Friðleifsson’s, the powerful girls, kept as slaves.⁷]

The narrative voice of the poem is at once complicated: the speakers are actors in what appears to be the beginning of an episode, yet their possession of foreknowledge suggests that they have control not only

over the narration of the episode but possibly over its course. The reliability of their assertion is confirmed by the authoritative shift into third-person narration in the second half-stanza, with the observation that the residence they have arrived at is that of Fróði Friðleifsson and the relationship of the girls to him is one of servitude. To an audience well versed in the conventions of Eddic dialogue, the note of suspense struck by the speakers divulging that they are prescient might have deepened to a chord of foreboding as the narrator explains that the protagonists of the drama, characterized as powerful [*máttugr*], have been enslaved.

The degree to which Fenja and Menja are the agents of action is accentuated in the narrative strand describing their work in the next few stanzas (sts. 2/1–4, 3/1–4, 4/1–4):

Þær at lúðri
leiddar váru
ok grjóts grjá8
gangs of beiddu. ...

Þær þyt þulu
þögnhorfinnar.9
“Leggjum lúðra
léttum steinum.” ...
Sungu ok slungu
snúðgasteini
svá at Fróða man
flest sofnaði.

[They were led to the mill-box and they demanded movement from the machine of rock. ... They murmured the groaning of the thing from which silence had disappeared. “Let us set up the mill-boxes, let us lift the stones.” ... They sang and they slung the swiftly-turning stone until Fróði’s servants mostly slept.]

While Fróði may imagine himself to be the foreman of his mill, it is the girls who are effectively issuing the orders, with control of the mill a proxy for power in the syntax of lines 3–4 of stanza 2 (*ok grjóts grjá gangs of beiddu*). The wording of the poem brings their utterance into close alliance with their physical activity—*sungu ok slungu*—even to the point where the sound of their voices is the sound of the mill: *þulu þyt*. By using the verb *þylja* to describe the vocalization of their power, the girls become implicated in the well-attested but still mysterious tradition of declamations by *þulir* (figures who recited highly valued knowledge) and, within the Eddic context, the authoritative enunciation of mythological verities.¹⁰

As the grinding gains momentum, the metaphor of silence having

disappeared from the scene [*þögnhorfinnar*] initiates a series of figurative inversions that highlight the discrepancy between what Fróði perceives to be happening and what Fenja and Menja gradually reveal is happening. Indeed they may be disclosing their dissimulation with a pun on the verb *létt* in stanza 3, which can mean both “to lift” and “to stop”: the alternative meaning would bring their declaration that they will set up the milling into abrupt contrast with their subsequent announcement that they will finish with the grind-stones, foreclosing on Fróði even before work on his milling order has begun.¹¹ Because the temporal point of view of the narration derives partly from the perspective of prescient speakers who are providing a running commentary on what, effectively, they will have already done, there is frequent slippage between the timeframe in which the action is experienced by Fróði and the more expansive dimension through which the girls’ commentary ranges.

Initially, in what is presented as the evening of the day on which they begin their work, they declare that they will mill boundless wealth for Fróði, providing him with a life of carefree luxury (st. 5):

Auð mölum Fróða,
 mölum alsælan,
 < mölum > ¹² fjölð fjár
 á feginslúðri.
 Siti hann á auði,
 sofi hann á dúni,
 vaki hann at vilja,
 þá er vel malit.

[Let us mill wealth for Fróði. Let us mill a completely blessed Fróði; let us mill a plenitude of riches on the joyful mill-box. May he sit on wealth, may he sleep on down, may he wake to joy; then it will have been well milled.]

Rather than addressing Fróði directly, they announce their intentions to a broader public, one that within the world of the poem presumably encompasses the king’s subjects and the subjects of future kings as well. The unusual syntax of the second element of their declaration—the masculine accusative singular form of the adjective *alsæll* implying the object of their milling is Fróði himself—reveals the extraordinary nature of the girls’ power in effectively producing the phenomenon of a thoroughly fortunate king.¹³ The ease his wealth will bring could cushion him from all cares during both his daylight and night-time hours, with the transition between them also guaranteed to be joyous—a barbed observation considering the state of military alarm the king will soon wake to. For now, the discursive

shift between half-stanzas—between the indicative and the subjunctive moods—signals the gap between what the girls enjoin each other to do and what the benefits might be for the king if their entreaty is fulfilled. As evening draws in and gold is churned out of the magical mill, the king may expect to wake to boundless wealth, though that possibility is cleverly held in prospect in the foreshortened temporal space of the poem.

Fenja and Menja are quick to point out that the king's good fortune will not be bestowed on him purely for his own benefit; their beneficence is aimed primarily at his kingdom, which they seek to transform into a social utopia where his subjects may live free of malice, liberated from any craving for vengeance—and here their discourse is that of legislative pronouncement (st. 6):

Hér skyli engi
öðrum granda,
til böls búa
né til bana orka,
né höggva því
hvössu sverði
þó at bana bróður
bundinn finni.

[Here no-one shall harm another, plot misfortune or engineer another's death; nor shall he strike with the sharp sword even if he finds the killer of his own brother bound.]

Fróði's attitude toward such mighty benefactors is, however, less than circumspect (sts. 2/5–8, 3/5–6):

Hét hann hvárigri
hvíld né ynði
áðr hann heyrði
hljóm ambátta. ...

Bað hann enn meýjar
at þær mala skyldu.

[He commanded neither rest nor pleasure for either of them until he heard the harmony of the slave-girls. ... He again told the girls that they should mill.]

Impatient with greed, Fróði deprives Fenja and Menja of rest from the beginning, wanting only that the sound of their industry fill the air. Yet the *hljómr* he demands of them signifies more than his cloth ears detect. While the word might refer metaphorically to the whirring of the mill that Fróði demands to hear, it also refers to the words Fenja

and Menja are singing to him. In addition, since it serves as the base-word in a number of kennings for “battle,” it sounds a note of foreboding as the noise of the mill begins to amplify.¹⁴ Apparently unaware of any of this, or of the greater good the favor of the giantesses might deliver for both him and his kingdom, Fróði breathlessly continues to insist that neither the mill nor the girls be allowed to stand still for more than a moment (st. 7):

En hann kvað ekki
orð it fyrra:
“Sofið eigi þit
né of sal gaukar¹⁵
eða lengr en svá
ljóð eitt kveðak.”

[But he spoke no word sooner than this: “You shall not sleep any more than the cuckoos above the hall, or any longer than while I sing a single song.”]

Once again Fróði’s instructions to the girls introduce unconscious ironies: the song of the cuckoo is characterized by an unpredictable number of repeat calls, with periods of silence of uncertain duration between calls. This irregular pattern—disconcerting for the observer wishing to determine the length of the song (or the length of the cuckoos’ sleep)—is projected in the poem onto Fróði’s crazed mind as he seeks to control a natural force that does not operate according to his bidding. As he will soon find out, he can no more control how long Fenja and Menja sleep than he can control what they mill.

Fróði’s ungracious response to the utopian bounty offered by the girls is presented as the turning point in the poem. Fenja and Menja now explain to Fróði—addressing him directly for the first time—the fatal mistake he has made (st. 9):

Varattu, Fróði,
fullspakr ok þik,
málvinr manna,
er þú man keyptir.
Kauss þú at afli
ok at álitum,
en at ætterni
ekki spurðir.

Harðr var Hrungrir
ok hans faðir,
þó var Þjazi
þeim öflugari,
lði ok Aurnir,

okkrir niðjar,
brœðr bergísa:
þeim erum bornar.

[You were not, Fróði, altogether wise in relation to your situation, conversation-friend of men [> leader], when you bought servants. You chose them for strength and appearance but you did not ask about their ancestry. Hrungrir was hard, as was his father, yet Þjazi was more powerful than them. Iði and Aurnir, our ancestors, brothers of mountain-giants: we are descended from them.]

As John Lindow puts it in his interpretation of the poem, “stanzas 8 and 9 reveal that Fróði’s [sic] problem has a mythological side” (152). The slave-girls who, to begin with, were simply described as physically strong are now revealed to be members of the race of giants, an attribute Fróði has entirely overlooked. The implication of the girls belonging to a powerful giant dynasty is that they might be expected to be in fundamental antipathy to the interests of gods and men, though, like a number of their kind, these giantesses seem potentially well disposed to men (see Schulz; McKinnell). Not only has Fróði based his selection of slaves purely on superficial characteristics, he has also neglected to make any enquiries about their pedigree, a signal lack of prudence in a king. By describing Fróði as *málvinur manna*, a “speech-friend of men,” the giantesses deploy a kenning-like construction ironically to establish an ideal of kingship where reliability in counsel and loyalty to his subjects would not be neglected as they seem to be in Fróði’s kingdom.

The incremental definition of the attributes of the speakers works in *Grottasöngur* as it does in *Grímnismál*, to lend drama to the poem as the speakers’ emergent identity gathers mythological gravitas. With Fróði all but silent throughout, the dialogic pattern of *Grottasöngur* also parallels *Grímnismál*, in which Grímnir’s recitation is met by King Geirrøðr’s dumbstruck comprehension as he realizes the identity, and the mythological power, of his nemesis. It is significant to the staging of the encounter that it is not made explicit at what point Fróði falls asleep, and this must have been a crucial aspect of the poem in performance. Perhaps the king falls into a slumber along with the rest of his retinue after his last orders have been barked out (st. 7), or perhaps his dozy silence should be taken as indicative of his impotence now that the giantesses are performing at full throttle.¹⁶ While the staging of the poem in the period between evening and dawn intensifies the theatricality of the giantesses’ nocturnal *coup d’état*—lending the work some of the qualities of naturalistic drama—in terms of legendary history, it figures the prospect of an age of

prosperity as the hours of darkness, utopian prospects foreshortened almost to a dream.

Fenja and Menja now disclose how, in their childhood play, they transformed the chthonic power of their rock environment into technology (sts. 10–12):

Koemia Grotti
ór grjá fjalli
né sá hinn harði
hallr ór jörðu
né mœli svá
mær bergrisa
ef vissi vit¹⁷
vætr til hennar.

Vér vetr núu
várum leikur,
öflgar, alnar
fyrir jörð neðan.
Stóðu meyar
at meginverkum,
fœrðum sjálfar
setberg ór stað.

Veltum grjóti
of garð risa
svá at fold fyrir
fór skjálfandi.
Svá slongðum vit
snúðgasteini
höfgahalli,
at halir tóku.

[Grotti would not have come from the grey mountain, nor the hard boulder out of the earth, nor would the mountain-giant girls be milling as they are, if we had known nothing about it. For nine winters we were playmates, mighty ones, born beneath the earth. The girls set for themselves works of strength; we ourselves moved the mountain-seat from its place. We rolled the rock out of the home of the giants so that the ground in front of it shook. We slung the fast-turning stone, the heavy boulder, so that men got it.]

Their agency in making the technology available to men is openly declared. Though the millstone is now available so that the chthonic power of the rock mountains may be utilized for human industry, it remains a natural resource over which giant-kind seems to have inalienable possession. Unlike other resources belonging to the giants—such as the mead of poetry—the millstone has not been transmuted into a product by dwarfs or *Æsir*, and it apparently still needs giant

strength to make it productive.¹⁸ The infinite prosperity that the mighty stone has the potential to produce stands as an emblem of what human culture, working in harmony with the natural world (through its female agents), might achieve. This, like so much else, the king has not understood. In their singing and slinging of the millstone (*snúðgasteinn* st. 4), Fenja and Menja are extending a project already begun when they rolled the *snúðgasteinn* out of the mountain landscape and the thunderous song of Grotti was conceived (st. 12).

With their involuted explanation of the current situation—the millstone would not be here if we had not known about it from the beginning, and we would not now be milling and singing for the king—the giantesses signal more than prescience. They have set up an elaborate test for the king by providing him with Grotti; were he dealing with less powerful figures than these two, Fróði might have grounds for claiming entrapment. The nine winters of their youth spent beneath the earth align the speakers not just with giant-kind but also with the prophetic *völur*—also bred underground in an environment characterized by divisions into nine (*Völuspá* 2)—whose authoritative pronouncements on future events are beyond dispute. But there is even more to the life-story of these extraordinary girls than that (sts. 13–15):

En vit síðan
á Svíþjóðu
framvísar tvær
í folk stígum.
Beiddum björnu
en brutum skjöldu,
gengum í gegnum
gráserkjat lið.

Steyptum stilli,
studdum annan,
veittum góðum
Gothormi lið.
Vara kyrrseta
áðr Knúi felli.

Fram heldum því
þau misseri
at vit at koppum
kendar váru < m > .
Þar skorðu vit
skörpum geirum
blóð ór benjum
ok brand rúðum.

[And afterwards we two foresighted ones strode into the army in Sweden. We challenged bears [warriors]¹⁹ and broke shields, we went through the grey-shirted troop. We brought down a ruler and propped up another, we granted good Guthormr support. There was no sitting quietly until Knúi fell. We kept on like this for some seasons such that we were known as champions. We scraped blood from wounds with sharp spears and we reddened the sword.]

Harking back to their earlier description of themselves as *vit framvísar tvær*, Fenja and Menja now recount other crucial interventions they have made in the lives of kings, their foreknowledge in these instances resulting in support for some and death for others. For them the question that arises in relation to each king they engage with is whether to *styðja* or to *steypa* him: both scenarios are entertained for Fróði during the course of the poem, though the tipping point to the latter has by this stage passed.

Active service in the theatre of war by supernatural women is also depicted in *Darraðarljóð*, an Eddic poem quoted within *Njáls saga* (Einar Ól. Sveinsson 454–458), where the speakers describe how they contrived the demise of one prince to the advantage of another (sts. 4/5–8, 5, 6/5–8, 7/1–2, 5–8, 8/5–6, 9/5–8):

Fram skulum ganga
ok í folk vaða,
þar er vinir várir
vápnum skipta.
Vindum, vindum
vef darraðar,
ok siklingi
síðan fylgjum!
Þar sjá bragna
blóðgar randir,
Guðr ok Göndul,
er grami hlífðu. ...

Látum eigi
líf hans farask,
eigu valkyrjur;
vals of kosti.

Þeir munu lýðir
löndum ráða ...
kveð ek ríkum gram
ráðinn dauða;
nú er fyrir oddum
jarlmaðr hniginn.

Nú er vefr ofinn,

en völlr roðinn ...

mun lopt litat
lýða blóði,
er sóknvarðar
syngja kunnu.

[Let us go forward and wade through the warriors, there where our friends exchange weapon-blows. Let us wind, let us wind the weaving of spears, and then let us follow the king! There Guðr and Göndul see the bloody shields of heroes when they protected the leader ...; Let us not destroy his life: valkyries have their say over the slain. Those men will rule lands ... I declare the powerful king is doomed to death; now the earl has sunk down in the face of spears. ... Now the warp is woven and the battle-field reddened ... the air will be stained with the blood of men when the battle-wardens [> valkyries] know how to sing.]

The identity of the speakers in *Darraðarljóð* is overdetermined by the use of the iconic valkyrie names Guðr and Göndul and by the elaboration of their mythological role: “eigu valkyrjur vals um kosti.” While Fenja and Menja are not explicitly identified as valkyries in *Grottasöngur*, the parallel with the discourse of *Darraðarljóð* brings definition to their role: when speakers like these choose to follow a king, they either promote him as a ruler of lands (and protect him in battle) or destroy his life. In both poems, the activity of the valkyries is unconnected with Óðinn’s project of stocking Valhöll with the best fighters in preparation for *ragna rök* and more closely resembles the behavior of valkyries in the Helgi poems, where they turn their attention to selecting paragons of manhood out of the mêlée of battle and consigning to death those who do not impress them (Quinn 2006). While the valkyries’ capacity to choose the best is inflected by love in the Helgi poems, in *Darraðarljóð* and *Grottasöngur*, it appears to be driven by the social ideal of a king worthy of ruling lands and people.

Song is the conceit in both *Darraðarljóð* and *Grottasöngur*, the death sentences the valkyries chant realized through the blast of fighting in which the doomed warriors are slain. Behind the unequivocal lyrics, however, the workings of fate are imagined in *Darraðarljóð* as the complex interweaving of spear paths: once the valkyries have determined warriors’ fates, the missiles hit their marks and blood is let on the battlefield. In *Grottasöngur*, a different metaphor is used, the executors of fate expressing their industry not in terms of gory weaving, but of milling. Whereas the valkyries of *Darraðarljóð* declare their warp is woven once the king’s fate is sealed, Fenja and Menja toy

with Fróði throughout the poem in their drawn-out sequence of references to the milling they will eventually finish.²⁰ Just as the temporal perspective shifts during the course of the song, so the manner in which the giantesses turn the tables on Fróði is signalled in a number of ways. By describing their vanquishing of other kings in the past as a lack of quietness (*vara kyrrseta*), a hint is dropped about the significance of the racket they now make. Perhaps the most striking turning point in the commentary of the enslaved ones is their return to the introductory words of the poem in stanza 16, as the scene is replayed with the audience, if not Fróði, now understanding so much more:

Nú erum komnar
til konungs húsa
miskunnlausar
ok at mani hafðar.
Aurr etr iljar
en ofan kulði,
drögum dólgis sjotul.
Daptr er at Fróða.

[Now we two fore-knowing ones, merciless, have come to the residence of the king and are kept as slaves. Mud eats into our soles and there's a chill from above: let us drag round the settler of hostility [> millstone]. It's dull at Fróði's.]

The account of their activities in stanzas 13 to 15 has shown that those arriving at Fróði's court are political enforcers rather than itinerant servants and that, in the business of deciding the fates of kings, they are merciless. The word order of the first half-stanza invites the dual interpretation of *miskunnlauss* as the girls “exhibiting no mercy” and, in collocation with *ok at mani hafðar*, “shown no mercy,” though the latter sense of the compound is subordinate given the flow of action at this point in the poem.²¹ With their own skaldic-inflected diction, they transform the entity that is Grotti from an agricultural or industrial tool into a fantastic war machine: they control *dólgis sjötull*, the instrument that can now determine the outcome of battle by producing troops to secure military dominance.²² The giantesses' rather tart assessment that life is dull at the king's residence is born out of the physical discomfort Fróði has condemned them to as well as their own impatience with a king who has conclusively proven he does not deserve their favor. The statement also drily registers the fact that the king's doom has now caught up with their foreknowledge of it. Despite that inevitability, the giantesses only wind up their industry slowly (st. 17):

Hendr skulu hvílast,
hallr standa mun,
malit hefi ek fyrir mik,
mitt of létti.²³
Nú muna höndum
hvíld vel gefa
áðr fullmalit
Fróða þykki.

[Arms should rest, the stone will stand still; I have milled my share, my turn has finished. Now no rest will be properly given to hands before Fróði thinks the milling is complete.]

As the grinding millstone slows, the giantesses turn their attention again to Fróði, drawing irony from the shift in focalization—as though the king might still be the judge of whether their milling has been properly executed. And they strike back at him with his own words, issuing mock orders to themselves that their arms will not have the *hvíld* he had forbidden them (st. 2). While the dialogic pattern of the poem elides the possibility of Fróði's response at this stage, the audience is nonetheless invited to consider his reaction by the refocalization in the last two lines.

In a further rhetorical shift into the idiom of war, the giantesses warm to their theme of the strength of arms (st. 18):

Hendr skulu hölða²⁴
harðar trjónur,
vápn valdreyrug.
Vaki þú Fróði!
Vaki þú Fróði!
ef þú hlýða vill
söngum okkrum
ok sögum fornum.

[Warriors' arms shall be hard shafts, weapons slaughter-bloodied. Wake up Fróði! Wake up, Fróði, if you want to hear our songs and our ancient sagas.]

What Fróði needs to wake up to—although it is probably already too late for him—is the meaning of their song and the meaning of the parable they have just told. When they recounted in stanza 14 that they supported a good king but crushed another (presumably bad) king, the giantesses were not merely passing their shift with idle reminiscences: they were announcing their mythological role in the lives of kings. Once again, the temporal perspective of the speakers is refracted across legendary time as they describe their autobiographical antics as “ancient” (*forn*)—which they are to the

poem's audience but not to Fróði, who is still living the unfurling narrative. The giantesses warn Fróði once again that he needs to attend to the words of their song rather than be lulled by the din of their industry into an unguarded sleep. The depiction of waking up to battle is elaborated in the tenth-century poem *Bjarkamál*, and such a work (or others like it) may well have been familiar to the audience of *Grottasöngur*, deepening the resonances of the giantesses' battle cry. In a thematic parallel that highlights good kingship, *Bjarkamál* also links the king's summoning of his warriors to war with his distribution of gold to them, including, among the multiple kennings for gold, "Fenja's toil" (ed. Finnur Jónsson BI: 170).

The giantesses' song now changes key to the prophetic, as Fenja and Menja reveal Fróði's destiny (st. 19):

Eld sé ek brenna
fyrir austan borg
—vígspjöll vaka—
þat mun viti kallaðr.
Mun herr koma
hinig af bragði
ok brenna boe
fyrir buðlungi.

[I see fire burning to the east of the stronghold—news of war awakes— that is known as a war-beacon. An army will come here all of a sudden and, before the king, burn down his estate.]

Their turn of phrase echoes the prophetic utterances of *völur*,²⁵ yet the discourse of Fenja and Menja is more interactive than straightforward linear prophecy: what they envision (l. 1) and what will happen (ll. 5–8) are interleaved with an aside (l. 3) and an explanation (l. 4), the latter presumably ironic in tone as the import of their vision is spelt out to the sleeping or sleepy Fróði. Their aside, *vígspjöll vaka*, is impressively multivalent: it is at once an announcement of what they with their supernatural powers are causing to happen (spells of war are being enacted), a reiteration of what is happening (battle is announced), and a commentary on men's imminent reaction to it (news of war will spread).²⁶ The figurative play on the semantics of *vaka* also reverberates with the dramatic interest throughout the poem in Fróði's state of awareness, as well as with the utopian possibility he has now forfeited, that he would forever wake to joy (*vaki hann at vilja* st. 5).

By this stage of the poem, Fenja and Menja are portrayed as political power brokers, able to choose the best kings—not, as already

mentioned, for marriage or for death and further fighting in Valhöll—but for political success. That these speakers morph among giantess, *völva*, and valkyrie should not surprise us: the *völva* in *Völuspá* is described as having been raised by giants (*Völuspá* 2); the cave-dwelling Hyndla is described as *brúðr jötuns* (bride of giants) after she has capped her genealogical recitation with a prophecy (*Hyndluljóð* 50 and 44); and Skuld is listed among both *valkyrjur* and *nornir* (*Völuspá* 20 and 30). Indeed in their dealings with Fróði, these giantesses also have something of the *norn* about them: the prophecy of prosperity they enunciate in stanzas 5 and 6 is effectively an enactment of Fróði's fate until they are moved to revise it. While it is generally the case in Old Norse sources that *nornir* and *völur* do not interact with the subjects whose fates they either determine or prophesy, the imagining of the *valkyrja* offered different possibilities. All three supernatural female figures, the *völva*, the *norn*, and the *valkyrja*, are fundamentally personifications of fate, yet the valkyrie's role in choosing the moment of a hero's death seems to have invited the possibility of direct interaction, at a crucial moment, between the decreeing subject and the powerless object of destiny. In the minds of those who pondered the workings of fate in Eddic poetry, it seems to have been a short step from a warrior's death being mortgaged on the battle-field by a princess-valkyrie to the length of a king's reign being re-negotiated by an unimpressed valkyrie-giantess—though in these difficult-to-date traditions, the move might, of course, have been in the opposite direction. What is shared by both kinds of Eddic encounter is the notion that fate, once animated, is invested with a personality that is responsive to a hero's behavior and that the assessment made of his merit (or lack of it) is, in broad terms, in line with cultural ideals of masculinity in general and kingship in particular.

The valkyrie activity of Fenja and Menja is therefore foundational to the conception of the interaction between the king and his fate. Tolley, however, regards this phase of the poem as “one of the weakest structural elements of *Grottasöngur*” and considers “the emphasis on the episode [the engagement in wars in Sweden] ... excessive.”²⁷ On the contrary, I would argue, the giantesses are lent legitimacy by their association with valkyries as they intervene in the fashioning of idealized kingship because it is valkyries who are qualified, according to the mythology, to discriminate between the best and the rest. When Tolley describes the giantesses as suffering what he terms a “‘fall from grace’ in their social position ... becoming involved in the sordid politics and wars of men” (16), he ignores the

complexity of the mythological conception of supernatural intervention in the lives of kings. While the animation of fate produces dramatic possibilities, it does not support a fully psychologized interpretation of the giantesses, whose behavior exceeds the literal reading Tolley attempts.²⁸ Far from depicting a renunciation of their divine nature, the poem exploits the figures' polymorphous divinity as they intervene in the affairs of men to safeguard responsible kingship as a social ideal. Rudolf Simek is also wide of the mark when he describes the contents of the work as "two maids complain[ing] about their fate in a poetic dialogue" (120). The meaning of the poem certainly depends on the fundamental nexus between the giant-esses and fate, but it is a king's fate and not their own that is the center of interest in *Grottasöngur*.

Rather than engaging in physical slaying as they have done in the past, Fenja and Menja now engineer political warfare among kings, yoking together their prescience with the wilful efficacy of valkyries as military strategists, protecting some and denying protection to others. The course of action is now inevitable for the king and his people, as the giantesses announce their judgment, which in rhetorical terms is both prophecy and killing-spell (st. 20):

Munat þú halda
Hleiðrar stóli,
rauðum hringum
né regingrjóti.
Tökum á möndli,
mær, skarpara,
eruma varmar²⁹
í valdreyra.

[You will not keep the throne of Hleiðr, nor the red-gold rings nor the supernatural millstone. Let us grasp the handle harder, girl; we are not warm in corpse-blood.]

By equating the loss of Grotti with the forfeiture not only of wealth but also of his throne, the giantesses spell out the consequences of Fróði's ill-advised treatment of them: he has committed political suicide. But by using an auxiliary verb of futurity to express this inevitability, Fenja and Menja also wring out of their performance still more suspense as they take up the mill-handle again. The giantesses continue to hover between the figurative and the literal in their valkyrie-song, welcoming the idea of prospective slaughter to warm their mud-cold feet. Alluding once again to the kinship relations from which they derive their power, the (unspecified) speaker continues the

pattern of shifts between dual first-person and third-person narration, as the giantesses provide a simultaneous commentary on the acts they carry out (st. 21):³⁰

Mól míns föður
mær ramliga
þvíat hon feigð fira
fjölmargra sá.”

[My father’s girl milled powerfully because she saw the doom of a multitude of warriors.]

Having changed their tune, the singers now appear to have become inspired in their labor by the prospect of doom fulfilled, and, in doing so, they exhibit a euphoria that *völur* are never shown to enjoy in the act of envisioning the inevitable. Once again, it is the level of animation accorded to valkyries and giantesses that provides the scope for emotional reaction as well as direct interaction with the objects of predestination.

By changing the currency of what Grotti produces, Fenja and Menja turn the king’s greed for more milling into his own martial vulnerability. As the vigor of their supernatural grinding causes the housing of the mill to start to break apart (st. 21), still they incite each other to work the killing machine harder: *möllum enn frammar* (“Let us go on milling” st. 21 repeated st. 22). Fróði is accelerated toward the fate that both giantesses know will come about—*vítum báðar þat* (“we both know that” st. 22)—as they outline the course of political vengeance that they have, in harmonious tandem, designed for him. He will be killed by Yrsa’s son and brother, an allusion to the legend of the incestuous birth of Hrólfr kraki.³¹

As the giantesses’ song comes to its conclusion, the mythological aspect of their power is accentuated (st. 23):

Mólu meyjar,
megins kostuðu.
Váru ungar
í jötunmóði. ...
hraut hinn höfgi
hallr sundr í tvau.

[The girls milled, exerted their strength. The young ones were in a giant fury. ... The heavy stone split apart into two pieces.]

A *jötunmóðr* is the phenomenon that characterizes *Miðgarðsormr* at the onset of *ragna rök*, Hrungrnir when challenged by Óðinn and the

giant-smith when tricked out of Freyja, the sun and the moon by Loki's consorting with Svaðilfœri: it is not a force that a king might expect to counter.³² It is such a force, in fact, that even the instrument of their political machinations cannot withstand it, and the millstone itself breaks apart.

Finally, in the last stanza of the poem, the giantesses declare that—irrespective of what Fróði may think or even comprehend—these girls come down from the mountains have now had enough of milling (st. 24):

En bergrisa
brúðr orð um kvað:
“Malit höfum, Fróði,
sem munum hætta.
Hafa fullstaðit
fljóð at meldri.”

[And the bride of the mountain-giant said these words: “We have milled, Fróði, such that we will stop. The women have done their stint of milling.”]

The plot has come full circle, and the milling metaphor has played itself out: the poem closes with political eventuality coalescing with mythological design. But compared with the triumphalist declarations of Óðinn and Þórr when they have silenced their opponents to death in the dialogues *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*, the giantesses' conclusion is understated: they simply present themselves as women who have finished their task since, by this point, the purpose for which fate was animated has been achieved. The poem ends as it began with the narrative voice split between the narrator and the speakers, though here the mode of *inquit* (*En bergrisa brúðr orð um kvað*) registers the significance of the utterance in a way similar to the introduction of Fróði's momentarily ill-judged announcement in stanza 7: “En hann kvað ekki orð it fyrra: ‘Sofið eigi þit.’”³³ It may be the giantesses themselves who shift the focalization beyond themselves in the final lines, although in the unpunctuated manuscript text, the third-person statement might equally be understood as emanating from the narrator. Either way, the milling and the talking have both come to a close, Grotti is in pieces and Fróði will soon go the same way.

Within the span of their song, Fenja and Menja have envisioned a lost future, recounted their startling mythological past, and predicted imminent events that will soon overtake the king, their discursive modulations and dramatic posturing staged to produce a poem that, as

Harris has described it, is “artistically unified and ... conceptually unique among poems of the Eddic type” (1993, 245). The themes of the poem are developed out of a sequence of oppositions and reiterations—the “conspicuous symmetrical relationships” noted by Harris (1990, 240)—one of which is the opposition between sleep and work. Until he mistreated them, Fróði was offered sound sleep on a feather bed and the promise of waking to self-determination and joy, the qualities of life he deprives the giantesses of. Opposed to tranquil sleep—which represents ease and liberty—is the enforced noise of labor required of Fenja and Menja. An industrial standard is stipulated by Fróði where sleep is paid for by work but in terms that are grossly unfair to the hard-working giantesses. Their response, in waking him from his self-indulgent torpor not to a life of ease but to the alarm of an army’s attack, is fully justified within the narrative frame of the poem, which implicitly underwrites the giantesses as arbiters of social justice, not just on their own behalf, but on behalf of the king’s subjects as well. Moving in parallel with the contrast between liberty and tyranny is the comparison made at various points in the poem between sound and silence. As sound, the giantesses’ work and their song are melded into one, Fróði insisting the sound continues without interruption, not thinking that the sense of their song or the product manufactured by the mill might be other than he wishes it to be. The deprivation of silence that he imposes on them is met by the roar of the millstone, which banishes quiet—and peace—from Fróði’s court forever.

The supernatural power of the millstone Grotti, which ultimately eludes the king’s acquisitive intent, is highlighted by a series of circumlocutions throughout the poem: it is the machine of rock (*grjóts grjá* st. 2), the swiftly-turning stone (*snúðgasteinn* sts. 4, 12), the heavy boulder (*höfgahallr* sts. 12, 23), the hard boulder out of the earth (*inn harði hallr ór jörðu* st. 10), and the mountain-seat removed from its place (*setberg ór stað* st. 11). These descriptions draw attention not only to the powerful nature of Grotti but also to its natural home in the mountains, in giant territory (*garðr risa* st. 12). While the rock hewn out of the mountains has positive potential—in the right circumstances, it could serve as a joyful mill-box (*feginslúðr* st. 5)—its underlying identity belongs to another sphere. It is mighty in a supernatural sense (*regingrjót* st. 20), and from the beginning of the poem, when silence itself is extinguished by its presence (*þögnhorfinn* st. 3), the unnerving power of the boulder is felt. In the hands of the giantesses in valkyrie mode, Grotti is transformed beyond this, into an

instrument that can determine the outcome of men's wars (*dólg's sjötull* st. 16). The mythologizing of industrial production in the poem gives the lie, incidentally, to the hypothesis drawn from other mythological sources that giant-kind saw no value in the poetic mead (Clunies Ross 68), giantesses in this instance running rings around the king with their display of skaldic diction. Accordingly, in their sometimes riddling formulations of identity (*míns föður mær* st. 21; *sá mun hennar heitinn verða burr ok bróðir* st. 22), Fenja and Menja challenge the interpretative acuity and legendary knowledge of the audience as well as their interlocutor; it is striking in this regard that the blunt referent "gold," around which so much of the discourse of the poem revolves, is never used.³⁴ In addition, the shifting of voice from one giantess to the other and, on occasion, to the two of them in concert (marked mainly grammatically, although Fenja is identified as the speaker in st. 4) makes their song acoustically complex, a spatially disorienting effect that mirrors the uncertainty of Fróði's intellection.

Grottasöngur is a sophisticated exploration of mythological relations as they pertain to men, most especially to the fortunes of a king who seeks to exploit natural resources that are conceived of as belonging to the realm of the giants.³⁵ A mythological reading of the poem unlocks the semiotic complexity of the composition, which itself extends our understanding of the way in which a legendary king's fate was, in this work at least, understood to be determined: not fixed once and for all at birth by *nornir* or by *valkyrjur* at the moment of the warrior-king's final act, but potentially throughout his reign by patrolling giantesses who could insinuate themselves, undetected, into his realm. In a modern context, the legend of Grotti might be read as a kind of political lesson about ecology, the actions of the women from the rock serving as a warning of the consequences of greedy exploitation of resources. As such, the song of Grotti still resonates: there are always political leaders with self-serving agendas who wish to exploit resources recklessly and who pay little heed to fair working conditions, even if in imagining their demise we might regard the scenario of giantesses paying them a visit too fantastic for our modern sensibilities.³⁶

Notes

1. Not to be confused with the Codex Regius manuscript of the Poetic Edda,

preserved in the same Royal Library (hence its name), but with a different number (2367 vs. 2365).

2. For a discussion of the use of dialogue in eddic poetry, see my 2002 article (which includes an analysis of *Hyndluljóð*) and an article forthcoming in 2012 (for an analysis of dialogue in *Helreið Brynhildar*).
3. Vésteinn Ólason likens the mode of *Grottasöngur* to the heroic elegies, with a central scene and simple narrative frame, in which a review of past events is blended with the prophesying of future events (130–132).
4. An account of kings called Fróði in extant sources is provided by Tolley (4–15); see also Neckel.
5. On this point, see von See *et al.* (840) and Tolley (44, 59).
6. The edition of the poem used in this chapter is from Anthony Faulkes’s edition of *Skáldskaparmál* (1998), which is based on the fourteenth-century Codex Regius of *Snorra Edda*. The numbering of the poem is altered from the running sequence of verses within Faulkes’s edition, where the poem is counted as vv. 159–182. Of earlier editions, those of Sophus Bugge, Gustav Neckel (revised by Hans Kuhn), and Jón Helgason, also generally follow the manuscript texts of the poem more closely than the recent editions of Tolley and Dronke do.
7. Translations are my own but have benefitted from the glossaries of Faulkes (1998) and Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, as well as the translation by Larrington.
8. The meaning of *grjá* is uncertain: see *Lexicon poeticum*, s.v. For a discussion of the possible meanings of the word (which include “grey”), see Faulkes (1998, 295), von See *et al.* (875–876), and Tolley (45).
9. Tolley describes “the seemingly nonsensical manuscript ‘þulu’ as “a mistake” (45) and amends the text to “þutu þognhorfnar (they started [the screaming], shunned by silence)” (37), while Dronke, judging the “more sedate” manuscript reading *þulu* to be a confusion of *þutu*, which “could apply to wild wolfish sounds” of the young giantesses (147), amends the text to *þutu þögn horfin var* (translated as “they shouted [shouts]—silence had vanished!”). Compare Faulkes: “They drew forth the sound of the silence-banished thing” (1987, 108) and the glossary translation of *þögnhorfinn*: “having lost its silence” (assuming gen. *kvernar* with *þyt*) (1998, 439).
10. On *þulir* see Poole; Óðinn and his peer-in-wisdom, the giant Vafþrúðnir, are described as a *fimbulþulr* and *inn gamli þulr*, respectively (*Hávamál* 80, 111, 142; *Vafþrúðnismál* 9).
11. Compare Faulkes, who notes “the proposal may be to stop grinding rather than to start” (1998, 188) and the discussion of the word in von See *et al.* (879–880).
12. Editors usually adopt the Trajectinus reading of this line in preference to the Regius reading, which does not include a verb; Bugge, however, keeps the Regius line (326), and Dronke notes that “the stanza is more striking if there is not a third *möllum* inserted” (146).
13. See von See *et al.* (2000, 886). Tolley translates this unusual construction “let us grind him all-fortunate” (37), whereas Dronke amends the text to *alsælu* and

translates “let us grind all good fortune” (140).

14. See *Lexicon poeticum*, s.v.; as Tolley notes, the word is possibly intended here “to hint at the violence to be milled out for Fróði” (45).
15. The syntax of lines 3–4 appears elliptical, and I follow Faulkes in my translation of *of* as “above” (1998, 366); for a detailed discussion of the lines, see von See *et al.* (893–896). Tolley amends to “Sofið eigi þit meir en syngrat gaukr,” based on the prose paraphrase of the legend preceding the poem in *Skáldskaparmál* and on a putative borrowing into the poem from a verse by Egill Skallagrímsson (48); Dronke also uses the prose text to guide the restoration of what she terms the “badly broken text,” though she acknowledges that the emended text is one that she has “invented” (140). Compare Bugge (326), Jón Helgason (90), Neckel and Kuhn (298), and Faulkes (1998, 53), where the manuscript text is not emended.
16. Dronke imagines specific stage directions to accompany these stanzas: “[Menja stops milling and looks critically at the sleeping Fróði]” (141).
17. The Regius manuscript appears to indicate a doubling of the *t* in *vitt* (Trajectinus reads *vit*), which some editors have construed as a reference to magic: see von See *et al.* (901–907). Bugge treats *vitt* as adverbial (“widely”) (327). Compare Neckel and Kuhn (298), Faulkes (1998, 54), Tolley (39), and Dronke (141), who retain *vit*. Tolley and Dronke, however, both amend the abbreviated *hennar* to *kvernar* at the end of the stanza.
18. Margaret Clunies Ross (127ff.) examines myths in which natural resources coveted by the gods are stolen from giants and converted by male deities into cultural resources. With Oosten (64), her emphasis is on the role of males in transforming natural resources, with females credited only with a role in the transfer of goods. Neither discusses *Grottasöngur*, which depicts a rather different scenario, in which giantesses provide men (rather than gods) with a natural resource and the means to capitalize on it.
19. Dronke notes: “clearly not ‘bears’ but ‘fierce warriors’ ... real bears would not have shields and iron-mail jerkins” (147); see also von See *et al.* (913–916).
20. *Mala skyldu* (st. 3), *mölum* and *þá er vel malit* (st. 5), *né mæli svá mærl bergista* (st. 10), *malit hefi ek fyrir mik* (st. 17), *mól míns föður mærl ramliga* (st. 21), *mölum enn frammar* (st. 22), *mólu meyjar* (st. 23), and *malit höfum* and *hafa fullstaðit fljóð at meldri* (st. 24). On the temporal perspectives of the poem, see von See *et al.* (852) and Vésteinn Ólason (122–127).
21. Faulkes translates “shown no mercy” (1987, 109), with the sense “merciless” acknowledged in his glossary (1998, 356); Tolley too sees the agency here as Fróði’s rather than theirs, translating “and without pity have been put as slaves” (40), as does Dronke: “accorded no compassion” (143). In line with the interpretation suggested above, von See *et al.* translate “die Unbarmherzigen” (922–923).
22. Dronke interprets the change in meal from gold to warriors here as a consequence of Fróði’s design rather than the giantesses’, in response to which she regards them as being “grievously offended” (148).
23. The manuscript reads *leiti*: see von See *et al.* (928–930) and Faulkes (1998, 345) for a discussion of the word. Tolley amends to *hleyti* and translates “in accord

- with my pledge” (40), as does Dronke (143).
24. See von See *et al.* for a discussion of this problematic line, which is amended to *hendr skulu höndla* by them (933–935) and other editors: Jón Helgason (92), Neckel and Kuhn (300), Tolley (41), and Dronke (143). Compare, though, Bugge (328) and Faulkes (1998, 327).
 25. Compare *Völuspá* 30, 31, 38, 59, 64; *Hyndluljóð* 19.
 26. See *Lexicon poeticum*, s.v. *spjall*, which in addition to the senses “account” and “news,” also carries the meaning “destruction,” producing a further intensifying reading “killing-destruction begins.” *Forn spjöll* is also the description used by the *völva* in the first stanza of *Völuspá* to denote her prophecy about the destruction of the gods.
 27. Judging that “the aspirations of the author of *Grottasöngur* were clearly less lofty [than those of the poet of *Darraðarljóð*],” Tolley speculates what a “greater poet” might have done with the material (28).
 28. See e.g., “There is no real purpose in their *curriculum vitae*, and it was mere chance that they happened to be responsible for wrenching the great boulders from the mountain side. ... Looking back from their abject position ... they impose their own fatalism upon their life story ... now seen as a deliberate self-humiliation, almost a divine kenosis” (16).
 29. The meaning of the manuscript reading *valmar* (with a hook between the *l* and *m*) is unclear. Jón Helgason keeps the manuscript text (92); Faulkes speculates the word may have been intended to be *valmæ*r (“slaughter-girls”) (1998, 420). Bugge, however, amended to *varmar* (328), and this reading is adopted by Neckel and Kuhn (300). Tolley (57) and Dronke (149) amend to *vamlar*, which is taken to mean “squeamish.” The wording of Codex Trajectinus, *valnar* (“stiff with cold”) is adopted by von See *et al.* (946–947).
 30. See, for example, the move from third- to first-person narration in stanza 9 or the shift from a singular to dual first-person construction in stanza 17. Bugge identifies the points in the delivery when he thinks one speaker took over from her sister (441–444), as does Dronke (139–145).
 31. On this stanza, which many editors regard as problematic because of its misfit with details in other sources, see von See *et al.* (950–960) and Tolley (58–59).
 32. See *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1988, 50, 51), *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 1998, 20), and *Gylfaginning* (Faulkes 1988, 35).
 33. Compare *Oddrúnargrátr* 8, where a similar *inquit* is also used to introduce a momentous declaration. Both stanzas 7 and 24 of *Grottasöngur* are only six lines long, a shift in stanzaic rhythm that reinforces their impact; stanzaic shortening occurs at other points in the poem as well (sts. 3, 4, 14).
 34. On the diction used in the poem, see further von See *et al.* (853–855) and compare the surprising assessment of Tolley, who judges “the riddling context [of describing warriors as bears in st. 13] appears to be lost on the poet of *Grottasöngur*” (53).
 35. Compare Tolley: “There is nothing of a mythological nature in the poem which challenges our understanding: indeed, there is little reflection of what must once

have been a rich mythological field” (31).

36. A version of this chapter was first presented at the International Medieval Conference in Kalamazoo in 2010, in the session organized by Carolynne Larrington and Paul Acker. I am grateful to them and to the audience at the session for a discussion of the ideas presented there, as I am to the seminar audience at Nordisk Forskningsinstitut at the University of Copenhagen where a later version of the chapter was presented in April 2012.

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The *Eddica minora*

A Lesser Poetic Edda?

Margaret Clunies Ross

Introduction

Ever since Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson came into possession of the late thirteenth-century Icelandic Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (GKS 2365 4° of ca. 1270) in 1643, and told the learned world about it, the poems contained in that manuscript have been accorded a privileged position in the post-medieval appreciation of Old Norse-Icelandic poetry. They have usually been edited separately from the rest of the very large corpus of Old Norse poetry that has survived the Middle Ages, have been the subjects of many separate commentaries and dictionaries, and have reached a contemporary readership in separate translations into a number of modern languages.¹ Thus, the modern reader tends to regard them as separate from the rest of the Old Norse poetic corpus, though in fact they share many points of similarity.

The twenty-nine poems in the Codex Regius, and some others preserved mainly in manuscripts containing the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson,² are composed in a style and meter largely shared with other early poetry from the Germanic-speaking world, including that in Old English, Old and Middle High German, and Old Saxon. However, their privileged position derives less from what they share with other Germanic poetic traditions and more from what is unique to them, their subject matter, which has no full parallel in the other Germanic traditions. The first eleven poems in the collection are

mythological; they narrate myths about the acts of the old pre-Christian gods, such as Óðinn, Þórr, Týr, and Njörðr, and certain giants and giantesses, like Hymir or Gerðr, or they represent the gods as speakers of dialogues, which frequently take the form of contests of wisdom and knowledge. The second and larger group of eighteen poems is usually classified as heroic, that is, they present events in the lives of men and sometimes women of great strength, courage, and ability, who were thought to have lived in the past and to have been frequently in contact with the Norse gods or other supernatural beings, as either their descendants or devotees. Some of the heroes known to the Scandinavians, like Völundr and Sigurðr, were also known to other Germanic peoples, though their acts are rarely represented in such detail elsewhere. Other heroes, like the protagonists of the Helgi poems (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I and II*, *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*) (Poem of Helgi, Slayer of Hundings I and II; Poem of Helgi Hjörvarðr's son) are not known outside Scandinavia. Selected poems from this heroic group within the Poetic Edda compilation are the subjects of most of the chapters in this volume.

There is another group of poems and poetic fragments in the Old Norse-Icelandic repertoire that can be called heroic in the sense defined above, and the purpose of this chapter is to describe them, say something of their contexts of preservation, and compare them with the heroic poetry of the Poetic Edda collection. These other heroic poems have been transmitted within prose texts for the most part, in a similar way to the transmission of the greater part of Old Norse poetry (i.e., skaldic poetry, see below), which is found embedded in prose sagas of various kinds. The kind of saga in which we encounter heroic poetry comparable to that found in the Poetic Edda is the so-called *fornaldarsaga* (plural *fornaldarsögur*) or “saga of the old time,” that is, the age of prehistory, as viewed from the perspective of Scandinavians of the medieval period (the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and later), when these sagas were probably written down. The time at which the protagonists of *fornaldarsögur* lived their lives was conceptualized as the near past, still just within the reach of communal memory, and the locations where their actions took place were usually thought of as within Scandinavia (but not in Iceland, where most of these sagas were probably composed), although the Scandinavia of the *fornaldarsögur* was inhabited by giants, trolls, and other non-human beings as well as by the heroes themselves (cf. Clunies Ross 76–80).

The considerable amount of poetry to be found in the texts of many *fornaldarsögur* has not been much studied or valued from a literary

point of view and has rarely been analyzed as a corpus. In 1903, two scholars, Andreas Heusler and Wilhelm Ranisch, published a selection of poetry from *fornaldarsögur* that conformed, by and large, to their idea of a *lied* or “song” recited by a single protagonist or a pair of speakers, and they took some liberties with the poetry as it actually appears in various manuscripts in order to achieve this impression. The title of their publication was *Eddica minora. Dichtungen Eddischer Art aus den Fornaldarsögur und anderen Prosawerken* (The Lesser Edda. Poems of Eddic type from the *fornaldarsögur* and Other Prose Works). This title, *Eddica minora*, that is, the lesser Eddic poetry from outside the corpus contained in the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda and various manuscripts of *Snorra Edda*, gives us a clue to how Heusler and Ranisch and most earlier scholars regarded the poetry to be found in *fornaldarsögur*. It was of “lesser” rank and value to the important poetry of the Codex Regius, which was and still is generally recognized as providing valuable information about pre-Christian myth and legend in Scandinavia and as being worth studying from a literary perspective.

Yet, ironically, at least some of the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* has as good a claim as much of the Poetic Edda corpus to antiquity and to connection with modes of thought of the preliterate period. Consider, for example, the close verbal correspondence between the six *lausavísur*, literally “loose verses” (freestanding, occasional verses) attributed to the dying hero Hildibrandr in *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (Saga of Ásmundr Champion-slayer) and parallel passages in Book VII of Saxo grammaticus’s *Gesta Danorum* (Acts of the Danes) (Saxo 2005, I, 7, 9, 14–19), as well as the correspondence between both of these Scandinavian sources and the ninth-century Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (Song of Hildebrand). The following stanza from the saga clearly parallels Saxo’s Latin and the Old High German text, and all are likely to derive independently from a widely known legend of a father who is obliged to kill his own son:

Liggr þar enn svási sonr at höfði
eptir, erfingi, er ek eiga gat,
óviljandi aldrs synjaðak.

[There lies behind the beloved son at my head, the heir whom I begot and unwillingly deprived of life.³]

medioxima nati
Illita conspicuo species cęlamine constat,
Cui manus hæc cursum metę uitalis ademit.

Unicus hic nobis heres erat, una paterni
Cura animi superoque datus solamine matri
(*Saxo* 2005, I, 7, 9, 15, ll. 6–10, p. 488)

[There stands the likeness of my son, whose course of life this hand brought to its boundary. He was my only heir, the one concern of his father's mind, given by the gods to comfort his mother (Fisher and Ellis Davidson 1: 224).]

nu scal mih suasat chind suertu hauwan,
breton mit sinu billiu, eddo ih imo ti banin werden.
(*Hildebrandslied*, lines 53–54; Braune *et al.* 85)

[Now my beloved son must strike me with his sword, cut me down with his blade, unless I become his slayer.]

It is true that the stanzas from *Ásmundar saga* manage to find a place, along with a few others from *fornaldarsögur* that are based on legends with analogues in other Germanic literatures, including *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Völsunga saga*, in an appendix to the current standard edition of the Poetic Edda (Neckel and Kuhn 302–314, 321–323), but it remains the case that, with few exceptions, poetry from *fornaldarsögur* has not been highly regarded from a literary point of view or indeed as having much cultural value at all.

The reasons are not far to seek. The poetry in *fornaldarsögur* has shared in the longstanding neglect of the *fornaldarsaga* genre as a whole, which has been widespread in the discipline of Old Norse studies until recently, while the focus of much recent research has been on how to read *fornaldarsögur* in more sophisticated ways than as pure escapist fiction about improbable supernatural protagonists (cf. Ármann Jakobsson *et al.*; Ney *et al.*). There have been few separate studies of *fornaldarsaga* poetry up to now, and few scholars have examined how poetry and prose interact in those sagas that use both literary media. Clearly, one of the main reasons that the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* has been overlooked is that it has been suspected of being “inauthentic,” that is, purporting to be old but in fact being rather young, compositions of no earlier than the thirteenth century and often of the fourteenth and fifteenth—or even later. Earlier editions, which are often still the standard or only ones of these texts, abound in statements that certain stanzas are “inauthentic” or are interpolations into the “original” saga text by some later redactor. These views have often led editors to rearrange the poetry in quite substantial ways that interfere with the reader's awareness of how the main manuscripts of these texts actually present their *prosimetra* (singular, *prosimetrum*), as combinations of verse and prose are known.

Many editors' presentations of the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* conform to outdated and mostly now rejected approaches to the textual editing of Old Norse sagas. While one acknowledges that the manuscript witnesses to most *fornaldarsögur* (as indeed with many other saga sub-genres) point to composition, redaction, and copying of texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and later, it is questionable whether these activities should be thought of in terms of an original text, its copying, and the addition of interpolations by some later redactor or redactors. It is particularly questionable when we approach the poetry contained in these sagas, much of which may well have had its roots in oral traditions and been transmitted for some time in variant forms, which manuscript traditions seem to have either included or omitted to varying degrees. While it is certainly true that one can point to many examples of later re-workings of the poetry in the extant manuscripts, including unmetrical lines augmented by free-standing personal and relative pronouns, or probable additions and expansions, to term these things "interpolations" or "inauthentic" additions requires one to believe that only the "original" was good and valuable, while the updated or modernized version has lost value. All versions have value to the literary scholar, even those that are not valuable from a text-critical perspective, though not necessarily all to the same degree. It is only when one sees the whole manuscript paradox of a particular text that one can understand the relationships among the variant versions.

Some Statistics

There are just over 800 individual stanzas to be found in *fornaldarsaga* texts. Not all *fornaldarsögur* contain poetry; of the twenty-six sagas or *þættir* (tales) usually classified as *fornaldarsögur*, nineteen or 73% contain some poetry. These are (in alphabetical order): *Áns saga bogsveigis* (Saga of Án Bow-bender), *Ásmundar saga kappabana* (Saga of Ásmundr Champion-slayer), *Bósa saga* (Saga of Bósi), *Breta sögur* (Sagas of the British), *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna* (Saga of Friðþjófr the Brave), *Gautreks saga* (Saga of Gautrekr), *Gríms saga loðinkinna* (Saga of Grímr Hairy-cheek), *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* (Saga of Walker-Hrólfr), *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* (Saga of Hálfr and the Hálfr-champions), *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (Saga of Hervör and Heiðrekr), *Hjálmþé*

saga ok Ölvis (Saga of Hjálmpér and Ölvir), *Hrólfs saga kraka* (Saga of Hrólfr Pole-ladder), *Ketils saga hængs* (Saga of Ketill Salmon), *Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar* (Tale of Ormr son of Stórolfr), *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Ragnars sona þáttur* (Saga of Ragnarr hairy-breeches and Tale of Ragnarr's sons), *Sturlaugs saga starfsama* (Saga of Sturlaugr the Industrious), *Sörla þáttur* (Tale of Sörli), and *Völsunga saga* (Saga of the Volsungs).

Not all manuscripts of each saga include the same number of verses; generally, younger manuscripts contain greater numbers of stanzas, suggesting that, as time went on, redactors collected more stanzas from various sources, some probably oral, or possibly themselves composed new verses about saga heroes. The numbers of stanzas within *fornaldarsögur* texts vary from 1 to 142, the highest number of all being found in the younger manuscripts of *Örvar-Odds saga*. It should also be noted that the total number of stanzas quoted here includes two Icelandic poetic versions of Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin prose *Prophetiae Merlini* (Prophecies of Merlin), *Merlínússpá*, which are preserved within *Breta sögur* (Sagas of the British), a prose translation of Geoffrey's *De gestis Britonum* (formerly known as *Historia Regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain)), that was the work of an Icelandic monk, Gunnlaugr Leifsson (d. 1218 or 1219). The tally above also includes a small number of stanzas in *Völsunga saga* (Saga of the Volsungs), which are additional to the many poems that relate the life of the hero Sigurðr and his supposed relatives in the Codex Regius manuscript, where they are joined narratologically by short prose explanatory links. These conjoined poems in the Codex Regius are in effect a proto-*fornaldarsaga* and may indicate how this type of saga originated, a subject to which we shall return later in this chapter. The author of the prose *Völsunga saga*, by contrast, used at least twelve of the Codex Regius poems as sources but only quoted directly from a small number of them.⁴

The Poetic Edda and *Fornaldarsaga* Poetry: Similarities and Differences

The neglect of the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* mentioned earlier carries through to the study of its verse forms, style, and literary character. Its metrical and stylistic closeness to the poetry of the Codex Regius

corpus is usually taken for granted rather than analyzed. This chapter investigates the extent to which the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* can be characterized as distinctively “Eddic” and what that term means with regard to the essential properties of verse form and meter, diction, style, subject matter, and genre displayed by the two bodies of verse. It leads then into a discussion of the likely inter-relatedness of the two corpora and some speculation on the cultural conditions within Scandinavia that led to the creation of the types of poetry found in both the Poetic Edda and *fornaldarsögur*.

Verse Form and Meter

It was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that the poems of the Poetic Edda are in a version of the same verse form as is found in surviving medieval vernacular poetic traditions from other Germanic-speaking communities of Europe. This verse form is often referred to as the common Germanic alliterative meter, and versions of it occur in Old English and some Middle English poetry, Old and Middle High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse-Icelandic. In essentials it is stress-based and divisible into two half-lines comprising a variable number of syllables, which are linked to one another to form a so-called long-line by alliteration that falls on a stressed, usually initial, syllable. Several rhythmical patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables have been identified within the half-lines. The Germanic alliterative line does not have a regular syllable count and does not usually employ rhyme, whether internal or line-final. The stanza from *Ásmundar saga* and the lines from *Hildebrandslied* quoted above illustrate the verse form, and the alliterating letters in the Old Norse stanza are bolded and underlined.

The main Old Norse version of the common Germanic alliterative verse form is called *fornyrðislag* (old story meter), a term already recorded in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda* (Faulkes 38), usually thought to have been composed in the 1220s. *Fornyrðislag* is the dominant metrical form in both the Poetic Edda and *fornaldarsögur*, though other metrical types do occur, notably *málahátt* (speeches form) and *ljóðahátt* (song form). These meters have conventionally been classified as “Eddic” because they are dominant in the Poetic Edda, but in fact all can also be found in the much larger corpus of poetry

conventionally labelled “skaldic.” Skaldic poetry was the dominant elite poetic form in Old Norse, composed by Norwegian poets associated with the courts of Norwegian kings from the late ninth century, but later more widely practised, especially in Iceland and by Icelanders at Scandinavian courts, but also found in the Orkneys and to a limited extent in the Scandinavian communities in the British Isles. The dominant skaldic verse form was *dróttkvætt* (court meter), which probably developed out of *fornyrðislag* (Gade 7–12). It is still alliterative but has a regular six-syllable line, and it is ornamented with internal *skothending* (inserted rhyme, half-rhyme) in the odd lines and *aðalhending* (noble rhyme) or full internal rhyme in the evens. A small amount of poetry in *fornaldarsögur* is in *dróttkvætt*, but this meter does not appear in the Poetic Edda corpus.

Although scholars have conventionally seen “Eddic” meters as characterizing the poetry of the Poetic Edda and the *fornaldarsögur* in contrast to *dróttkvætt* and other “skaldic” meters, which have been thought to characterize “skaldic” poetry, this distinction is by no means watertight. In fact, *fornyrðislag* is the second most common metrical form in the skaldic corpus (Faulkes 86–87). A better way of looking at the deployment of verse forms within the whole corpus of Old Norse poetry from the ninth century onward is to see skaldic poetry as the mainstream “here and now” kind of poetry, whose poets adopted both older meters (*fornyrðislag* and other “Eddic” verse forms) and the new meters of *dróttkvætt* and other syllable-counting innovations. *Fornyrðislag* and other “Eddic” meters were probably felt to belong to an older age and an older subject matter. They seem to have been considered appropriate in medieval Iceland to sagas that tell old stories, that is, *fornaldarsögur*, those set in the past before the settlement of Iceland, just as it was also thought appropriate to associate alliterative poetry with mythological or legendary subjects, such as are found in the Poetic Edda collection. Poetic inscriptions on Scandinavian runestones are also usually in Eddic meters. This hypothesis is confirmed by two aspects of Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*. First, in his catalogue of metrical forms in the section called *Háttatal* (List of Verse-forms), he begins with the more complex forms of *dróttkvætt* and its variants and ends his catalogue with the simpler, “Eddic” forms, indicating his awareness of a historical progression from one to the other. Second, in the *Gylfaginning* (Deception of Gylfi) section of the *Edda*, where the fundamental myths of the pre-Christian religion are set out, selected stanzas from poems of the Poetic Edda collection are put into the mouths of the supernatural beings who are

the subjects of the mythic narratives. Skaldic poetry, by and large, is not quoted in *Gylfaginning*, which deals with the mythic past, but it is the dominant exemplary form in *Skáldskaparmál* (The Language of Poetry) and *Háttatal*, which deal with the diction and verse forms, respectively, of the skaldic corpus.

Lexis, Diction, Style, and Subject Matter

No thoroughgoing study exists, as far as I am aware, of the extent to which the lexis and diction of *fornaldarsaga* poetry overlaps with that of the Poetic Edda corpus, on the one hand, and the skaldic corpus, on the other. However, Robert Kellogg's concordance to the Poetic Edda (1988), which includes a selection of *fornaldarsaga* material, is a valuable help, as are Finnur Jónsson's *Lexicon Poeticum*, Kuhn's *Kurzes Wörterbuch*, particularly as updated and translated by Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, and the published volumes of the in-progress Frankfurt *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, especially Volumes 4, 5, 6, and 7 (von See *et al.* 2004, 2006, 2009, 2012), which cover the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda collection. These texts are quite likely to have assumed the forms in which we know them around the same time as much of the poetry in *fornaldarsögur*. There is a great deal of useful and suggestive analysis of meter, style, and diction in these volumes of the *Kommentar*. Once the new skaldic editing project is finished (Clunies Ross *et al.* 2007–), and the Poetic Edda corpus has been added to its database (<http://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/wag017/db.php>), it will be possible to analyze the vocabulary and diction of the whole medieval Norse poetic corpus.⁵ Until then, analyses of the lexis and diction of Old Norse poetry will remain incomplete.

Many of the themes and subjects of the heroic poetry of the Poetic Edda corpus are shared by the *fornaldarsögur*, although their literary realization is often somewhat different. Thus, it would be surprising if there were not a reasonable overlap in their vocabulary and diction. Probably the most important single subject of both corpora is the life history of a hero. In the Poetic Edda, though not in the *fornaldarsögur*, with the exception of Hervör in *Hervarar saga*, who assumes a male role, heroines like Guðrún Gjúkadóttir and Brynhildr Buðladóttir play important parts, though these are usually tragic rather than purely

heroic. For the most part, though, the heroes are male. Among the heroes of the Poetic Edda are Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (Slayer of Fáfnir); the Niflungar Gunnarr, Högni, Hamðir, and Sörli; Helgi Hundingsbani (Slayer of Hundingr); and Helgi, son of Hjörvarðr. The lives and adventures of these characters are treated in several consecutive interconnected poems, each sequence constituting a kind of proto-*fornaldarsaga*, as has been mentioned earlier. The rationale for much of this connectedness is to be found in links established through kinship and marriage, in such a way that the characters come to be related in ever more complex ways to one another. This process allows the histories of individual heroes and their families to be linked to other narratives, which were probably originally separate; thus, the story of the death of the Gothic tyrant Jörmunrekkr (Ermanaric) at the hands of Hamðir and Sörli, who are said to be the sons of Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, is linked to the legend of the Niflungar through the figure of Guðrún, her various marriages and their offspring. Thus, although these heroes still encounter tests and obstacles and perform brave deeds, their stories are bound up in family intrigue and sexually motivated conflict.

Some of the *fornaldarsögur* are also linked in similar ways, including *Völsunga saga* and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*. The sagas of the Hrafnistumenn (Men of Hrafnista) (modern Ramsta), an island off the coast of Namdal in Norway, are connected by kinship themes. Ketill hoengr (Salmon) is the father of Grímr loðinkinni (Hairy-cheek), and Án bogsveigir (Bow-bender) is also related to them in some sources, as is Örvar-Oddr (Arrow-Oddr) (cf. Hughes 212–215). These heroes are also connected in other ways: each derives some special attribute or possession from his risky but successful encounter with one or more figures from the Other World, which is usually located in these sagas in the north of Norway, represented as the home of Saami sorcerers and sexually exciting but dangerous giantesses or troll women. Many heroes of *fornaldarsögur* engage in physical conflicts or verbal exchanges with these Otherworld figures to a greater apparent extent than the heroes of the Poetic Edda, though, as we will see below, such encounters are also present in some of the Edda poems as well. The deep structure of both bodies of text is arguably the same: in his youth, the hero must undergo a series of tests at the hands of Otherworld figures before he can be proved truly heroic; having successfully passed over the threshold into adulthood, he is free to marry and engage in a variety of heroic adventures (cf. Schjødtt).

The question arises as to how Old Norse heroic poetry conveys its

core themes of heroic character and behavior (including conflict) and encounters with Otherworld beings in exotic settings through its choice of vocabulary and its use of particular stylistic resources. There is no doubt that the subject of warfare and the lives of heroes, common to both the poetry in *fornaldarsögur* and the heroic poems of the Edda, lies behind their similar word-hoards and the greater frequency of kennings in the heroic over the mythological poetry of the Edda. Another factor influencing the similarities between the two bodies of text, however, is likely to be the relatively young age of much of this poetry, at least in the form we know it, and this similarity cannot be attributed to thematic correspondences alone. Nevertheless, a great deal of the vocabulary the two text corpora have in common can be found in skaldic poetry likely to date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries and later. Terms for “ruler” like *gramr* (ruler), *þengill* (prince), and *þjóðkonungr* (mighty king), are common in skaldic poetry in praise of kings and other rulers as well as in the heroic poetry of the Edda and in *fornaldarsaga* verse. These special poetic terms are often referred to in skaldic studies as *heiti*, and, though there are fewer of them in the heroic poetry of the Edda and in *fornaldarsögur* than in skaldic verse, their presence is not inconsiderable. Other heroic topics, such as warfare, weapons, and armor, as well as ships and the sea, also commonly attract the use of *heiti* and the kind of skaldic periphrasis termed the kenning,⁶ which is discussed below.

Much of the heroic poetry of the Edda collection boldly enunciates its heroic themes and represents its protagonists’ actions as affecting the natural world no less strongly than, for example, the god Þórr’s thundering ride through the skies in *Þrymskviða* (Þrymr’s poem) (st. 21) or in the late ninth-century skaldic poem *Haustlög* [Autumn long] (sts. 14–16). The opening stanza of the Eddic *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (First Poem of Helgi, Slayer of Hundingr) links the birth of the hero with the yelling of eagles and the descent of holy waters from the mountains of Heaven:

Ár var alda, þat er arar gullo,
hnigo heilog vötn af Himinfiöllum;
þá hafði Helga, inn hugomstóra,
Borghildr borit í Brálundi. (Neckel and Kuhn 130)

[It was a long time ago that the eagles shrieked, the sacred waters poured down from Himinfell; then Helgi, the man of great spirit, was born to Borghild in Bralund.] (Larrington 114)

For an audience attuned to both heroic and mythological poetry, there are telling resonances here. The first line, *ár var alda* (it was a long time ago), is also found in the cosmogonic poem *Völuspá* (The Sybil's Prophecy) (st. 3/1), which speaks of the origins of the cosmos, while *heilög vötn* (sacred waters) are also mentioned in another of the mythological poems of the Edda, *Grímnismál* (Speech of Grímnir) (st. 29/9). The effect is to align the birth of the hero, Helgi, with the momentous events that took place when the cosmos was also in its formative period. The epithet *hugomstórr* (of great spirit, bold) immediately speaks to the infant Helgi's essential heroic qualities. This same epithet is applied to the hero Hamðir in the Eddic *Hamðismál* (Speech of Hamðir) (sts. 6, 24, 27) and in *Guðrúnarhvöt* (Guðrún's Whetting) (sts. 4, 8) and also to the *fornaldarsaga* hero Hjálmar in both the prose and verse of *Örvar-Odds saga* (cf. ÖrvOdd *Ævdr* 33/6 and 35/2) (Örv 103, 105).

Another dramatic point of great significance in the heroic life is the hero's death, usually fighting against overwhelming odds, whether outnumbered by his enemies, subjected to torture, like Gunnarr bravely playing his harp in the serpents' pit in *Atlakviða* (The Poem of Atli) (st. 31), or at the mercy of an inevitable fate, like Örvar-Oddr, who cannot avoid the prophecy of a seeress, who foretold in his youth that he would die on the farm where he had grown up and that his horse Faxi would be the instrument of his death. Although there are some places in the Poetic Edda collection where a melancholy, even tragic note is struck in the poets' representations of their male heroes' deaths, this is in fact more characteristic of the death scenes of some of the heroes of *fornaldarsögur*, for reasons to be discussed below. The comparison here is perhaps more with the tragic heroines of the Poetic Edda, Guðrún and Brynhildr, who achieve a melancholy, elegiac tone in their laments about the misfortunes that have befallen themselves and the men, both sons and lovers, whom they mourn. An example of this elegiac note comes from a stanza of the hero Hjálmar's death song that is recorded in manuscripts of both *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Örvar-Odds saga*:

Sár hefk sextán, slitna brynju,
svart er mér fyr sjónum, sékat ganga;
hneit mér við hjarta hjörr Angantýs,
hvass blóðrefill, herðr í eitri.⁷

[I have sixteen wounds, a broken mail-coat, it is dark before my eyes, I cannot see to walk; Angantýr's sword has pierced my heart, the sharp sword tip, hardened in poison.]

Like the skaldic *heiti* mentioned earlier, kennings appear sporadically in both the heroic poetry of the Poetic Edda and *fornaldarsögur*. The kenning is a two-part periphrasis circumscribing a simple notion, which is not actually mentioned in the poetic text, like *hildimeißr* (battle-tree) or *vinr varga* (friend of wolves), both warrior kennings. For the most part, kennings are a stylistic characteristic of skaldic poetry, but they also appear here and there in both poetry of the Poetic Edda corpus and the *fornaldarsögur* as well as in other non-Scandinavian Germanic poetry. This latter circumstance suggests that the practice of kenning formation was initially something common to the Germanic alliterative tradition, which was later refined and intensified by Norse skalds. The use of kennings in *fornaldarsögur* and the Poetic Edda is probably largely traceable to a secondary influence from the skaldic kenning system, rather than being a continuation of the common Germanic practice, for the kennings used and the ways they are used suggest skaldic influence.

Poets composing skaldic poetry in Iceland used kennings well into the fourteenth century and beyond, even though there was at the same time a well-articulated movement against the use of obscure language, promoted chiefly by poets who were clerics. It is also undeniable that the new *ríma* genre of long narrative poems was a liberal user of kennings. However, the range of kenning types and referents commonly employed after 1200, by contrast with skaldic verse of the period before that time, became more restricted, and this restriction of range is mirrored for the most part in the *fornaldarsaga* and Poetic Edda corpus, though in somewhat attenuated form. In the skaldic corpus of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly the latter, there is a predominance of kennings for men and women, often, in the case of the men, represented as rulers or warriors, even in religious poems. A group of kenning-like phrases to express both the doctrine and personnel of the Christian Church grew up alongside the more traditional kennings that depended on conventional images of men as trees, distributors of gold, and wielders of weapons and women as trees and wearers of gold, silver, or various types of clothing. In all types of poetry, kennings that expressed kinship relations continued to be formed.

Poets' persistent use of kennings in later medieval Icelandic poetry can probably be attributed to two related factors: on the one hand, the desire to continue to work within the conventions of their predecessors because these conventions represented prestige and *gravitas*; on the other, the desire to ornament their poetry in order to

elevate its style. The concern, almost an obsession, with achieving stylistic elevation by means of complexities of diction is well attested in both the *Third* and *Fourth Grammatical Treatises* (ca. 1250 and 1340, respectively), particularly in the latter, where the author, who was probably the composer of most of the treatise's exemplificatory stanzas, went to great and ingenious lengths to replicate in Icelandic idiom the figures and tropes of his Latin exemplar.

It is probable, but not directly provable, that the presence of kennings in both *fornaldarsaga* poetry and the heroic poetry of the Poetic Edda corpus can be attributed to these dual pressures because, for the most part, increased frequency of kenning use in these texts is to be found in scenes of heightened emotional intensity and conflict, which suggests that the kenning was intended to raise the audience's awareness of tension and drama. There are, however, some important exceptions to this generalization, and these reflect one of the characteristics of *fornaldarsaga* poetry and, to a lesser extent, of the Poetic Edda corpus: its frequent use of dialogue and direct address, first noted in 1902 by Andreas Heusler. These styles of discourse, in which a speaker directs an autobiographical monologue toward imagined or potential listeners, such as we find in the numerous so-called *ævikviður* (life poems) in *fornaldarsögur*, or discourse in which there is dialogue between two antagonists, seem to inhibit, but not entirely suppress, the use of kennings.

Style and the Structural Components of *Fornaldarsaga* Poetry

In dialogues such as the *mannjafnaðr* (comparison of men)⁸ in *Örvar-Odds saga* or the dialogue between Hjálmar and Örvar-Oddr on the island of Sámsey in the same saga (and also in *Heiðreks saga*), there are few kennings; in the latter exchange, though its subject matter is tense enough, being an impending fight between the two heroes and twelve berserks, there is only one kenning, *hjaldrviðr* (battle-tree) for a warrior (Hjálmar *Lv* 3/2; *Örv* 9). The *mannjafnaðr* between Örvar-Oddr and two antagonists, Sjólf and Sigurðr, is also sparing of kennings; in twenty-five stanzas, there are eight kennings (one repeated) drawn from the semantic field of weapons and battle for the most part. Likewise there are few kennings in the dialogue between

Hervör and the ghost of her father Angantýr in *Heiðreks saga*. In a sequence of twenty-two stanzas, there are three kennings, for Hervör's breast (*muntún hugar* [mind-enclosure of the heart] Herv Lv 13/6), as spoken by herself, for the cursed sword Tyrfingr (*Hjálmars bani* [Hjálmar's slayer]; Herv Lv 14/8), and for ships (*gjalfrmarar* [sea-horses]; Herv Lv 18/2). It is notable that all these kennings, and the majority of those to be found in *fornaldarsaga* poetry, are simple in form; *tvíkent* (doubly modified) and *rekit* (extended) kennings are rarely used.⁹

Fornaldarsaga poetry is often monologic, to an even greater extent than is found in the heroic poetry of the Edda corpus. Whereas the monologic form of the lament is frequent in the Edda, especially in poetry uttered by female speakers, the forms that occur in the *fornaldarsögur* are predominantly male monologues, although the types of the prophecy and the curse are the preserve of female speakers. Short prophetic monologues, presented, however, as *lausavísur*, occur in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, *Örvar-Odds saga*, and *Orms þáttr Stórolfssonar*, while the sole example of the curse, *Buslubæn*, is delivered by the old woman Busla in *Bósa saga*. The nine *fornyrðislag* stanzas of *Buslubæn* contain no kennings.

There are many more monologues by male speakers than by females in *fornaldarsaga* poetry, and in fact this discourse form may be said to be one of the most striking in the corpus, especially notable in the so-called *ævikviða* (life-poem) or autobiography, which is characteristically uttered by great heroes looking back on their brilliant careers toward the ends of their lives or on the point of death. The fact that this type of retrospective monologue also occurs in Saxo grammaticus's Latin *prosimetrum* probably indicates that the trend toward monologic verse was widespread in Scandinavian poetry from the late twelfth century onward and was an attempt to recuperate the heroic past in poetic form. Among the best-known *ævikviður* in *fornaldarsögur* are the so-called death-songs of Hjálmar in *Örvar-Odds saga* and of Hildibrandr in *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, as well as the *ævikviða* of Örvar-Oddr, which runs to seventy-one stanzas in its longest version, the *Víkarsbálkr* (Vikarr's Section) attributed to the hero Starkaðr in *Gautreks saga*, and the poem *Krákumál* (Speech of Kráka), supposedly composed by the dying hero Ragnarr loðbrók. Variations between manuscript versions of these poems indicate that there was an observable tendency to amplify them by adding more and more stanzas in some witnesses.

The use of kennings in these monologues can only be described as

sporadic. In Hjálmar's death-song of seventeen stanzas (the count of the fullest manuscripts), there is only one kenning, for the daughter of the Swedish king the hero has left behind to undertake a career as a viking (*beð-Gunnr hlaðs* [beð-Gunnr <valkyrie> of lace-work] woman, Hjálmar Lv 7/2; Örv 17). In Örvar-Odd's *ævidrápa*, there are kennings for a variety of referents, including warriors, rulers, kinship terms, battle, arrows, fire, giants, and giantesses. Their usage tends to coincide, as one might expect, with points of high tension in Örvar-Odd's life-history. So, for example, in the stanzas that refer to Odd's famous journey to Permian, for which he became widely celebrated, there is a *tvíkent* warrior-kenning *boðar brynþings* (announcers of the mailcoat-assembly) [battle > warriors] (ÖrvOdd *Ævdr* 8/3; Örv 78), referring to the hostile Permians he encountered there, while a few stanzas further on (ÖrvOdd *Ævdr* 14/7–8; Örv 84), an unusual fire-kenning, *hávan ok rauðan hrottgarm viðar* (the high and red howling hound of the wood),¹⁰ describes the blaze Odd lit to attract the attention of members of his party with whom he had lost contact. Another example of the coincidence of kenning usage and points of dramatic high tension is *strengvölum stríðum* (with fierce bow-string sticks) [arrows] (ÖrvOdd *Ævdr* 38/3–4; Örv 108), a kenning Odd uses when describing how his blood-brother Ásmundr is killed by an arrow in Ireland. The association between the figure of Odd and arrows is an important one in his legend. His nickname Örvar-Odd (Arrow-Odd) is linked to the legend of the Hrafnistumenn by means of a reference to Ketill höngr's acquisition of the three famous arrows called Gusisnautar (Gusir's gifts), from Gusir, King of the Saami, which Odd's father, Grímr, has passed on to him, according to the prose saga.

There are obvious literary reasons that the frequent use of dialogue and monologue in *fornaldarsaga* poetry should inhibit or at least restrict the use of kennings. These forms of discourse privilege direct often agonistic utterances that would lose their dramatic force if they were larded with many kennings. The kenning is by nature an indirect linguistic form because it encapsulates a semiotic world within another world; when a listener or a modern reader discovers the meaning of a kenning, even a commonplace and completely conventional one, he or she turns aside momentarily from the main semantic message of the clause or sentence in which it is embedded in order to construe it. Dialogue and, to a lesser extent, monologue gain literary force by using linguistic forms that communicate directly with their audiences. The poetry in *fornaldarsögur*, like much of that in the

Poetic Edda corpus, purports to present the speech of its protagonists as they contend with one another or with their supernatural opponents, and it gives voice to the Other, whether the Other is a speaking mountain, a troll-woman, or a *draugr* (revenant) like Angantýr. It gives its audiences access to the life-histories, predictions, and other speech acts, like curses, of beings that come from another world.

Kennings do not always produce literary indirectness, however. A good example of how their use in *fornaldarsaga* poetry can sometimes enhance the literary effect of the topic of communication between worlds comes from *Ketils saga hængs*, which belongs to a group of sagas, mentioned earlier in this chapter, that narrate the adventures of the men from the island of Hrafnista in Norway. These people were believed in Icelandic tradition to have been the ancestors of some of the most famous Icelanders of the settlement age, like Egill Skallagrímsson. Toward the end of the saga, Ketill is challenged to a duel by an Óðinn-worshipping viking named Framarr because Ketill has refused to let his daughter marry the man against her will. Eight dialogue stanzas between Ketill and Framarr are spoken at their single combat. Their meter is an irregular *málahátt*, and the stanzas, the first two of which are presented here, are distinguished by a stark dramatic quality and by including a greater number of kennings than any of the other sets of stanzas in this saga. According to the saga prose, immediately before the combat begins, an eagle flies out of the forest and tears Framarr's clothes off him.

Illr er örn í sinni —emka sárr at kvíða—
færir hann sínar greipar gular í blóð æðar mínar.
Hlakkar hreggskornir: hvers er hann forkunnigr?
Opt hefi ek ara gladdan, góðr em ek valögglum.

Veifir þú vængjum, vápnum mun ek þér heita;
vafrar þú nú víðflögull, sem vitir mik feigan.
Villr ertu vígstari, vit munum sigr hafa;
hverf þu at Hængi, hann skal nú deyja.¹¹

[The eagle is evil in company; I am not wounded so that I am afraid; he thrusts his yellow claws into the blood of my vein. The storm-cutter [eagle] screams: about what is he prescient? I have often gladdened the eagle, I am good to corpse-geese [ravens/eagles].

You flap your wings, I will promise you weapons; you hover about now, wide-flown one, as if you knew me [to be] doomed. You are confused, slaughter-starling [raven/eagle], we two will have the victory; turn to Høengr, he must now die.]

These stanzas are dramatic and menacing. The drastic description of the eagle's behavior, focalized by several kennings, has parallels in skaldic poetry (see Jesch 252, 254–255, 264–265), while lines 3–6 of the first stanza suggest that the eagle is tearing at Framarr as if he were already a corpse on the battle-field because the bird knows that Ketill will kill his opponent. The second stanza presents a fine example of hubris. Framarr cannot believe that he is doomed and the eagle is intending to attack him. In lines 5–8 he tells the eagle that it is confused and that its hostility should be directed at Ketill because he is the one who is going to die. The emphatic pronouns *vit* (we two) (l. 6) and *hann* (he) (l. 8) draw attention to Framarr's false perception that he and the eagle are in alliance and are the main alliterating staves in lines 5–6 and 7–8, respectively. Such stanzas, and others employing the same techniques of direct speech combined with a judicious use of kennings and other forms of poetic diction, are well suited to one of the main literary purposes of Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, encounters between the inhabitants of different and usually exotic worlds.

The Development of the *Fornaldarsaga* as Prosimetrum

We saw earlier that not all *fornaldarsögur* are prosimetra, that is, some of them do not contain a mix of poetry and prose but are solely prose works, though over 70% combine the two media. We can only guess at the reasons for the absence of poetry in some sagas, and its presence in others, but some probable factors are not far to seek. The first is the prior existence of poetic treatments of the subjects of particular sagas, which may then have been retold as a mixture of poetic stanzas joined by explanatory prose links, as we see happening in the Codex Regius manuscript itself, particularly in the section of heroic poems. Some scholars (Holtmark; Torfi Tulinius 2002 55–63) have seen this desire to produce a coherent narrative line based on known poems as the primary motivation for the development of the *fornaldarsaga*. Within such a framework, however, there was obviously a great deal of liberty available to saga authors in terms of the amount of poetic material they cited and in terms of their verbal closeness to the texts of the poetry they knew and retold as prose with poetic

insertions. Sometimes, as with *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* and *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, the prose is largely there to provide a narrative link for the presentation of lengthy poems, where the stanzas are sometimes cited as a block, sometimes divided and presented as *lausavísur*. Both of these sagas comprise substantial long poems or poetic sequences linked by often minimal sequences of prose. In other sagas, however, the opposite occurs: saga-writers knew and summarized a good deal of existing poetry, as in *Völsunga saga*, while actually quoting a relatively small amount of it. A similar situation obtains, in all probability, in *Hrólfs saga kraka*, where Hrólfr's last battle is narrated wholly in prose, though it is likely that behind that prose account lies the composer's knowledge of the old lay *Bjarkamál in fornu* (The ancient speeches of [Böðvarr] Bjarki), a version of a poem also known to Saxo grammaticus.

Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks is a well-known example of a saga that includes significant poetry. There is a poetic sequence, often called "The Waking of Angantýr," on the subject of the heiress Hervör's quest for the doomed family heirloom Tyrfingr, a sword that has been buried with her dead father Angantýr in his grave mound. This saga is also famous for a sequence of stanzas that probably once formed a long poem, called *Hlöðskviða* (The Poem of Hlöðr), sometimes referred to as "The Battle of the Goths and Huns," which tells in spare and striking style of an ancient battle between these two tribal groups on the plains of eastern Europe. The third major poetic component of *Hervarar saga* is a riddle sequence in which an Odinic figure calling himself Gestumblindi engages in a wisdom contest with the legendary King Heiðrekr. By contrast with the poetry of this saga, the prose is of minimal literary interest.

From a chronological perspective, too, there seem to have been changing fashions among the composers, redactors, and audiences of *fornaldarsögur* with regard to the proportion of verse in comparison to prose to be found in these literary works. It seems likely that some of the poetry found in younger manuscripts of some *fornaldarsögur* answers to a taste for amplification of existing verse, particularly in the case of the monologic *ævikviður* of heroes like Starkaðr and Örvar-Oddr, especially the latter, whose poetic autobiography takes on a quasi-independent existence at the conclusion to the prose saga proper.

A second factor of importance in determining whether a *fornaldarsaga* contains verse as well as prose is likely to be the nature of the heroic subject matter itself. Those sagas that follow a

biographical format, in which the life-history of a hero is the central theme, like *Ketils saga hoenges* or *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, are more likely to contain poetry than those whose plots involve exotic adventures or bridal quests, like *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar* (Saga of Hrólfr son of Gautrekr) or *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* (Saga of Þorsteinn son of Víkingr). In addition, if the protagonists of *fornaldarsögur* are linked genealogically to historical Icelandic descendants, especially those who were poets or otherwise noteworthy in Icelandic society, then the sagas in which those ancestors are portrayed are most likely to contain considerable amounts of poetry. This factor applies to a number of *fornaldarsögur*, including all the sagas of the Hrafnistumenn (listed early in the essay), who were linked to the historical Mýrarmenn, *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* (Ragnarr was linked to important Icelandic families)¹² and *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*, the conclusion of which links the saga characters to historical figures in Iceland (cf. Seelow 157–161).

It is this connection with the heroic life-history that provides the closest link between those *fornaldarsögur* that contain poetry and the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda, in both subject matter and style. Although some subtle differences exist between the two text corpora explored in this chapter, the similarities between them are more striking than the differences and point to the probable contemporaneity of their generation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and even later in the case of some *fornaldarsögur*, at least in the forms we now know them. Yet, in many cases, in both *fornaldarsaga* poetry and the heroic poems of the Edda, the new wine was poured into old bottles that in some cases, at least, were created in much earlier times and have analogues in other Germanic literatures.

Notes

1. The fact that the standard edition of the Poetic Edda, by Neckel and Kuhn, is a separate book, and that a lexicon of this poetic corpus (La Farge and Tucker, based on Kuhn 1968) is separate from that of the rest of the corpus of Old Norse poetry, promotes the idea that the poetry of this compilation is very different from the rest. There are also separate commentaries on the Poetic Edda, the most recent of which is von See *et al.* The most recent English translations of the Poetic Edda are those by Larrington and Orchard.

2. These include *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr's dreams), *Grottasöngur* (The Song of Grotti), *Hyndluljóð* (The Song of Hyndla) and *Rígsþula* (The List of Rígr), all mythological poems.
3. The text is taken from Peter Jorgensen's edition and translation for the forthcoming Vol. VIII of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*.
4. For details of *Völsunga saga*'s poetic sources, see Finch, Appendix C, pp. 85–89.
5. All citations from *fornaldarsaga* poetry in this chapter are taken from the forthcoming Volume VIII of the new skaldic edition, eds. Clunies Ross *et al.* The sigla for poems and sagas used here may be found on the project's database.
6. *Kenning* as a technical term in skaldic poetics first appears in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (cf. Faulkes 5, 7, 12).
7. Hjálmar Lv 4^{VIII} (Örv 14). The text and translation are from my forthcoming edition in Vol. VIII of Clunies Ross *et al.*, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*.
8. The *mannjafnaðr* was a conventional literary form, found in both Old Norse poetry and prose and other Germanic poetic traditions (e.g., the exchange between Beowulf and Unferð in the Old English *Beowulf*), in which rivals exchange insults and boast of their own prowess at the expense of their rivals (cf. Clover). Examples occur in the Poetic Edda as well as in *fornaldarsögur*; in *Hárbarðsljóð* the rivals are the gods Óðinn and Þórr, while in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* (sts. 32–46) the exchange is between Sinfjötli and Guðmundr, and in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar* (sts. 13–30) the hero Atli engages with a troll woman named Hrímgræðr.
9. Similar results are presented by Hubert Seelow 144–7 in his analysis of the style and diction of the poetry in *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka*.
10. A very similar pair of lines occurs in a variant to *Helreið Brynhildar* (Brynhildr's Ride to Hel) (st. 10/4) (Neckel and Kuhn 221 and notes; von See *et al.* 6, 545–551) in *Nornagests þáttur* (The Tale of Norna-Gestr): *hávan brenna | hrottgarm viðar*. The context is the burning of Brynhildr's hall. The element *hrott-* is otherwise unrecorded.
11. Framarr Lv 1 and 2 (*Ket* 34, 35). The edition and translation is by Beatrice La Farge from the forthcoming Volume VIII, *Poetry from Fornaldarsögur*, of *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages*.
12. See e.g., the concluding genealogy to Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* (Book of the Icelanders), in which Ragnarr appears as one of the ancestors of the royal Ynglingar and of Ari's own family, the Breiðfirðingar (Jakob Benediktsson 1, 27–28).

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Fornaldarsögur and Heroic Legends of the Edda

Elizabeth Ashman Rowe

The Codex Regius preserves poems narrating the legends of Helgi Hundingsbani; Sigurðr Fáfnisbani the Völsung; Atli, king of the Huns; and Jörmunrekkr, king of the Goths.¹ These figures were originally independent of each other, but by the time the Codex Regius was compiled, they had been linked together. Helgi has become the half-brother of Sigurðr; Sigurðr's widow Guðrún marries Atli; and Svanhildr, the daughter of Sigurðr and Guðrún, marries Jörmunrekkr. And just as the popularity of the legend of Sigurðr drew the other famous names into its orbit, creating a larger syncretic cycle of legends, so too did it expand into prose narratives of the kind known as *fornaldarsögur* (sagas of ancient times). The present chapter examines the ways in which the figures and events of the Völsung legend have been used in this genre.

The pre-eminent *fornaldarsaga* adaptation of the Völsung legend is of course *Völsunga saga*, a prose version of the Eddic narratives produced by around 1260 or 1270 (Finch 1993b).² Its compilation was by no means a straightforward process. First of all, an earlier, complete version of the Codex Regius collection seems to have been the primary source, for the saga-author quotes or paraphrases twelve of the extant poems: *Atlakviða*, *Atlamál*, *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu*, *Fáfnismál*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, *Guðrúnarkviða* II, *Grípisspá*, *Helgakviða Hundingsbana* I, *Hamðismál*, *Reginismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, and *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (Finch 1965, 85–89). Some of the extant connecting prose was borrowed, too, such as *Frá dauða Sinfjötli*; the introductions to *Reginismál*, *Sigrdrífumál*, and *Guðrúnarhvöt*; and the prose within

Reginismál, *Fáfnismál*, and *Sigrdrífumál*. Furthermore, the poems that are presumed to have been in the gathering of the Codex Regius that is now lost are thought to have provided the material for chapters 24 through 31 of the saga. Despite this extensive reliance on verse sources, the saga-author dispenses with most of the poetic vocabulary and diction he encounters. Kennings are rejected, no poetic or semi-poetic expression for “prince” or “warrior” is ever retained, and embellishing adjectives in phrases such as “sharp swords” and “high halls” are ruthlessly cut out (Finch 1962–1965). The tendency to leave out all but the most necessary details is likewise seen in the saga-author’s omission of vocatives, epithets, repetition, and superfluous information. The conventions of saga-style, in which the emotional state of the characters must be divined from their appearance, words, and actions, requires that he omit articulations of sentiment as well. He reduces supernatural and mythological elements, sometimes in quite significant ways. Sigrún and her companions are depicted as shield-maidens rather than valkyries, and the originally separate figures of Sigrdrifa and Brynhildr are merged into one. In other cases, where the supernatural and the magical are organic components of the story, they are left in. The saga-author also works actively to improve the intelligibility of his prose, adding clarifications and transitions and introducing direct dialogue with phrases such as “he said” and “she said.” Again, this may affect the course of the narrative. For example, the betrothal of Sigurðr and Brynhildr (*Völsunga saga* ch. 22) is not found in the Edda. This may be because it was in the part of *Sigrdrífumál* that was in the gathering that is now lost, or it may be that it was never in *Sigrdrífumál* at all and is instead the saga-author’s interpretation of the implication of Sigurðr’s statement “Ástráð þín ek vil öll hafa / svá lengi, sem ek lifi!” [your loving advice I want in its entirety, / as long as I live] (*Sigrdrífumál* st. 21).

In addition to his adaptation of the Edda, the saga-author also includes entirely new material, characters, and interpretations of characters. [Chapter 1](#) through to almost the end of [chapter 8](#) are not from the Edda, and three short passages in chapters 32, 34, and 35 come from *Þiðreks saga af Bern* (Finch 1965, xxxvi–xxxviii). Later audiences do not seem to have rejected the introduction as inauthentic, for the authors of the *fornaldarsögur* made no distinction between newer figures such as Signý (the daughter of Völsungr), Bekkhildr (Brynhildr’s sister), and Heimir (the foster-father of Bekkhildr and Brynhildr) and the older figures such as Sigmundr (the son of Völsungr), Siggeir (the husband of Signý), Sigurðr (the

grandson of Völsungr), Reginn (the foster-father of Sigurðr), and Brynhildr (the daughter of Buðli). Heimir was not the invention of the saga-author, for Snorri Sturluson mentions him as the foster-father of Áslaug, the daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr.³ Siggeir was also not the invention of the saga-author, for in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*, Sinfjötli is called *stjúpr Siggeirs* (Siggeir's stepson) (*Helgakviða Hundingsbana I* st. 41), but the characterization of Siggeir as underhanded and deceitful and Signý's unwillingness to marry him may have been developed by the saga-author. Bekkhildr is the new character most likely to have been entirely invented by the saga-author, for she plays no role in the story other than to be contrasted with Brynhildr, and her position is the peculiar one of being married to her sister's foster-father.⁴ From the perspective of *Völsunga saga*, the explanation of why one sister is called Bekkhildr and the other is called Brynhildr implies a value judgment. Even though *hildr* means "battle" and is a typical element of valkyrie and warrior woman names, Bekkhildr [bench Hildr]—the woman who sits at home doing needlework—is the model of the proper courtly lady, whereas Brynhildr [byrnie Hildr]—the shield-maiden who dons a mail-coat and goes out to fight—is the destructive deviant. From the perspective of the *fornaldarsögur*, the emphasis on the compound nature of their names makes it easy to invoke Brynhildr through characters named simply "Hildr."

The creation of *Völsunga saga* is not surprising, for the Völsung legend was extraordinarily popular in Scandinavia during the Viking Age and the Middle Ages. From Sweden in the east to Greenland in the west, versions of the story appear in multiple media and contexts, including rune-stones, wall-hangings, church portals, Eddic poems, saga prose, genealogies, and handbooks of mythology. Significantly, apart from *Völsunga saga*, the *fornaldarsögur* do not retell the story themselves. Instead, they deploy the figures and motifs of the Völsung legend for a variety of quite different purposes, such as signalling noble or evil qualities, providing a historical or genealogical framework, putting the characters into a story in which they will find love instead of death, or simply creating an atmosphere of long-ago adventure or heroic antiquity.

A single name used in the right way is sufficient to invoke the legend. In stanza 36 of his death-song, Örvar-Oddr refers to himself as "Sigurðr norðan" [the Sigurðr of the north] (*FASN* 2, 351), which would appear to be a straightforward boast or expression of self-praise. The idea that Sigurðr the Völsung serves as a yardstick against

which heroes are measured appears earlier in *Örvar-Odds saga*, where the name Sigurðr seems to be used in order to highlight the deficiencies of two warriors who play minor roles in the narrative.⁵ The first Sigurðr is Örvar-Oddr's cousin, who along with Örvar-Oddr's brother Goðmundr serves as a competent but not outstanding fighter under Örvar-Oddr's command until the middle of the saga, when he and Goðmundr return to their home in northern Norway, determined to give up raiding and settle down to a quiet life. The second Sigurðr is the right-hand man of King Herrauðr, well-born and with the reputation of a great fighter. Like the first Sigurðr, he is paired with a similar character, a man named Sjólftr, and like the first Sigurðr and Goðmundr, the second Sigurðr and Sjólftr are repeatedly shown to be far inferior to Örvar-Oddr, who bests them at archery, swimming, and composing poetry while drinking. In the end, a curious discrepancy results, for Örvar-Oddr's superiority over the two Sigurðrs creates the implication that he surpasses the original Sigurðr as well, but the success of the comparison to Sigurðr in his death-song relies on the traditional reputation of Sigurðr as the best of heroes. The textual traditions about Örvar-Oddr are complex, and presumably what we see here arises from the death-song being incorporated into a saga by a later author who does not allow the brief allusion in the death-song to stand in the way of his ironizing treatment of Sigurðr in the saga itself.

An incontrovertible example of a small but deliberate allusion to the Völsung legend is found in *Ásmundar saga kappabana*, which includes a King Buðli and his daughter Hildr. The plot draws on the same legend as the German *Hildebrandslied* and culminates in the fatal duel between the heroes Hildibrandr and Ásmundr, who do not know that they are half-brothers, the sons of Hildr by her two husbands. Presumably the name Hildr Buðladóttir was chosen by the saga-author as an appropriate one for the mother, for Brynhildr Buðladóttir also in effect had two husbands and of course was central to one of the most tragic of heroic legends. Naming the mother of the unfortunate heroes after Brynhildr establishes a suitable atmosphere of foreboding. Nonetheless, although worked up out of heroic legend (e.g., *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks konungs*, with its cursed sword Tyrfingr, provides the motif of the magical sword that must kill every time it is drawn), *Ásmundar saga kappabana* draws back from the tragic potential of its sources. Whereas in the *Hildebrandslied*, a valiant father must kill or be killed by his own son, the *fornaldarsaga* pits a virtuous hero against a berserker half-brother whose fury before the battle is so excessive that

he slays his own son without noticing. A relatively happy ending naturally ensues: the berserker is killed, the virtuous hero survives and weds the King of Denmark's daughter, and the forced second marriage of Hildir Buðladóttir goes unexploited, an Eddic echo reduced to a blind motif.

In other *fornaldarsögur*, the deliberateness of the invocation of the Völ-sung legend is suggested by the presence of three, four, or even more characters with Eddic names. *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* even goes so far as to include a character named Edda in a cast that also includes a female warrior named Brynhildr, an evil king named Siggeir, and a loyal retainer named Sigurðr who is involved in a scheme to take on the appearance of another man in order to win a bride. The contented marriage between the Viking Þvari and the female warrior Brynhildr is a re-writing of the relationship between Sigurðr and Brynhildr, this time with a happy ending. Þvari and Brynhildr are the parents of two boys, Smiðir and Bósi, whose best friend is Herrauðr, the king's son. Further allusions to the Völsung legend appear when Bósi's foster-mother threatens to unleash poisonous snakes to gnaw the breast of King Hringr, who wants to put Bósi to death, and characters named Siggeir and Edda are introduced. King Goðmundr of Glasisvellir decrees that his sister Hleiðr shall marry Siggeir, although this is against her wishes, just as King Völsung betrothes his daughter Signý to King Siggeir over her objections. Goðmundr's chief councillor is named Sigurðr, who is also a master harper, perhaps an echo of the Eddic Gunnar, who in the snake pit skillfully plays the harp with his toes, keeping the serpents quiet until he is too exhausted to play. Sigurðr of Glasisvellir is killed while he is on a visit to his concubine, who is specified as living near the forest, perhaps to create a similarity to the version of the Eddic tradition in which Sigurðr is killed out-of-doors or in the forest.⁶ Another possibility is that the thought of Gunnar's death in the snake-pit brought *Oddrúnargrátr* to the mind of the saga-author, for that poem mentions that Gunnar met his lover Oddrún in the forest. And just as the Eddic Sigurðr takes on Gunnar's appearance to win Brynhildr for him, Bósi literally puts on the face of the dead and flayed Sigurðr to gain access to Goðmundr's sister. With Hleiðr rescued by being put in Sigurðr's giant harp, just as Sigurðr's daughter Áslaug was spirited to safety in Heimir's harp (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar* ch. 1), a double marriage is celebrated. Herrauðr marries Hleiðr, and Bósi marries Siggeir's sister Edda—an apt metaphor for the union of Eddic motifs and *fornaldarsaga* narrative. But the connections with the Edda are not yet exhausted: Herrauðr will later become the

father-in-law of Ragnarr *loðbrók*, whose second father-in-law is Sigurðr Fáfnisbani. Ragnarr is able to win the hand of Herrauðr's daughter Þóra by slaying a gigantic and dangerous serpent that had been Þóra's pet, and the saga-author reveals that it had hatched from the vulture's egg that King Hringr had sent Herrauðr and Bósi to fetch from Permia. *Bósa saga* thus reveals itself to be a prequel to *Ragnars saga*, written apparently with full consciousness of the latter's Eddic associations, which the saga-author is at pains to match.

Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra is another *fornaldarsaga* that gives the figures of the Völsung legend a happy ending. The Eddic echoes are faint at first, when we learn at the beginning of the saga that the parents of Hálfðan the protagonist are King Hringr of Denmark and his wife Signý. But once Hálfðan's career as a hero is properly launched, he kills a pair of trolls and finds in their cave Hildr, daughter of Jarl Angantýr of Scotland, and her brothers, the twins Sigmundr and Sigurðr, who become Hálfðan's foster-brothers. Another Sigurðr is introduced later, for in England, Hálfðan meets Alfifa, the daughter of King Sigurðr of Skörðuborg (Scarborough), who is the foster-brother of King Óláfr of England. Although Sigmundr falls in battle at the end of the saga, the remaining characters with Völsung names are married off in the best conventions of comedy: King Sigurðr of Skörðuborg marries Hildr, and Sigurðr of Scotland marries Alfifa, daughter of King Sigurðr of Skörðuborg. (Hálfðan himself marries Marsibil, the daughter of King Óláfr.) Unlike those in *Bósa saga*, the Eddic echoes in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra* are limited to the names of characters and the appropriate marriage between one of the Sigurðrs and Hildr. That Hálfðan is the son of a Völsung-named Signý and yet is clearly superior to the Sigmundrs and Sigurðrs he meets seems to be the saga-author's way of simultaneously acknowledging the noble qualities that Völsung blood bestows and showing that his own hero is greater than the most famous hero of legend.

Like *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, *Illuga saga Griðarfóstra* begins with King Hringr of Denmark, but in this saga, his son is named Sigurðr. Hildr is the wife of a cottager who lives near the king's hall; she is the mother of Illugi, Sigurðr's sworn-brother. Illugi and Sigurðr come across a troll-woman with a pretty daughter named Hildr. The troll-woman turns out to be Signý, the daughter of King Áli of Álfheim, who had been put into troll form by her evil step-mother Grímhildr. Once Grímhildr has been vanquished, Illugi marries Hildr, and Sigurðr succeeds his father and marries Signý. Sigurðr and Grímhildr bear some resemblance to their Völsung namesakes: Sigurðr is described as

“allra manna fríðastr ok at íþróttum bezt búinn ... blíðr við vini sína, örr af fé, en grimmr sínum óvinum” [the handsomest of men and the most capable at sports ... cheerful with his friends, liberal with his money, but fierce to his enemies] (*FASN* 3, 413), and the monstrous Grímhildr is skilled in magic like the mother of the Gjúkungs. The Völsung names (Bryn)hildr and Signý appear to be used for consistency; once a Sigurðr appears, surely a (Bryn)hildr and a Signý cannot be far off. The saga-author’s conception of his story seems quite simple, almost fairytale-like, with a noble hero who ends the disruption caused by an evil step-mother. The choice of Völsung names may have been influenced by the pattern of the narrative, for Sigurðr is a pre-eminently noble hero who is killed as a consequence of the machinations of a sorcerous mother. The trio of Hildrs—one a pretty daughter, one a benevolent mother, and one a malevolent step-mother—offers scope for psychological analysis, as do Illugi’s marriage to someone with the same name as his mother and Sigurðr’s marriage to a widow with a grown daughter (not to mention Heimir’s marriage to his foster-daughter’s sister in *Völsunga saga*). And did the saga-author overlook the fact that in the Völsung legend, Signý was Sigurðr’s aunt, and infamous for her incest with her brother? Despite any qualms that the marriages of the two heroes may cause in a modern reader, the saga-author seems to present the marriages as the requisite happy ending of a story with marked affinities to the Völsung legend.

A similar inclination is manifested in the creation of characters who are clearly intended to be parallels of figures from the Völsung legend, even if they do not have the same names. This is seen in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, whose heroine Ingigerðr is fostered with Jarl Skúli of Álaborg: “Hann var sagðr bróðir Heimis, fóstura Brynhildar Buðladóttir, er getr í sögu Ragnars konungs loðbrókar” [He was said to be the brother of Heimir, the foster-father of Brynhildr Buðladóttir, who is mentioned in the saga of King Ragnarr Shaggy-Breeches] (*FASN* IV, 249). Ingigerðr is thus positioned as Brynhildr’s counterpart, a role that her characterization goes on to support. Although not a valkyrie or a female warrior, she is a brave and spirited woman with some martial skills. When disguised as a man, she distinguishes herself at archery, chess, and other games but never trials of strength. When back in women’s dress, she appears to be in charge of the defense of Jarl Skúli’s castle while he and all the able-bodied men are out on the battle-field. Possibly the motif of the glimpsed ring also forms a parallel with the Völsung legend. There it

is the ring that had been on Brynhildr's hand and that comes into Guðrún's possession that proves to Brynhildr that it was Sigurðr and not Gunnar who rode through the magical flames and slept with her. In *Hálfðanar saga*, Hálfðan glimpses Ingigerðr's hand and ring and is thus able to identify their lovely owner later. However, to the extent that Ingigerðr is another Brynhildr, she is a Brynhildr feminized, married to the right man, and free from any tragically conflicting obligations. Her foster-father Jarl Skúli in fact becomes the killer of the father of her future husband Hálfðan, but Skúli also ends up saving Hálfðan's life, so the two are reconciled, and Hálfðan and Ingigerðr spend many happy years as king and queen of Norway.

Ingigerðr's sojourn in men's clothing while she travels with her foster-father is part of another Eddic echo, this one an inversion of *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. In that poem, Jarl Franmar conceals his foster-daughter Sigrlinn along with his own daughter Álöf after Sigrlinn's father Sváfnir is killed. The *fornaldarsaga* inverts this, in that Franmar hides the girls in a remote location but is later discovered and killed by Atli, who will marry his daughter, whereas Jarl Skúli brings his foster-daughter disguised as a man right into the court of their enemy, Hálfðan's father, and he is not killed himself but instead kills the father of Ingigerðr's future husband, as mentioned above. Nonetheless, in both narratives, the foster-daughter marries a Norwegian of royal blood and becomes queen in that land. Moreover, both narratives provide the foster-daughter with a companion. In *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, it is Franmar's daughter Álöf who is taken as wife by Atli, a jarl's son who helps King Hjörvarðr defeat King Sváfnir, and in *Hálfðanar saga*, it is Ingigerðr's maidservant, also named Ingigerðr, the daughter of Skúli's slave Kolr, who is taken as wife by Ulfkell, a Norwegian farmer's son who conquers Álaborg for Hálfðan's father.

In addition to the connections to the Völsung legend provided by Jarl Skúli and his protection of his foster-daughter, the saga also contains characters with the Eddic names of Sigmundr and Sigurðr, but these turn out to be links to the Norwegian royal dynasty as much as they are links to the Völsung legend.⁷ Sigmundr is the *stafnbúi* [forecastleman] of King Haraldr *hárfagri*, and Sigurðr *hjörtr* and Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga*—generally known as ancestors of Haraldr's mother—are here Hálfðan's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather. The genealogies that connect the Norwegian royal dynasty to the Völsungs are found in *Fagrskinna*, *Heimskringla*, and *Ragnars saga loðbrókar*, among other works (Rowe 2012, 196–217), but it speaks to the saga-

author's consciousness of the genre in which he is working that he cites *Ragnars saga*, even though Sigurðr *hjörtr* does not appear there and the saga-author must have gotten his information about him from one of the other sources, such as *Heimskringla*. Overall, however, his motivation is probably similar to that of the genealogists who enhanced the Norwegian royal dynasty by providing it with heroic ancestors or the compilers of the Wessex regnal list that shows Alfred to be descended from Scyld and Woden. In the case of *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, the heroic protagonist, who is after all a late medieval creation, is doubly glorified or legitimized as a hero by the associations with both the authentic heroes of the Völsung legend and the authentic kings of Norway.

A connection with Ragnarr *loðbrók* [hairy trousers, shaggy breeches] is also apparent in *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, where Grímr's nickname *loðinkinni* [hairy cheek] transmutes Ragnarr's shaggy garment for his nether regions into a shaggy cheek of another sort. The *loðbrók* and the *loðinkinni* are functionally as well as linguistically similar, for Ragnarr donned hairy cowhide trousers in order to protect himself against serpent venom, and Grímr's shaggy cheek is invulnerable to iron. (One also thinks of William of Jumièges's version of the legend of Ragnarr's son Björn *járnsíða*, who benefits from magic invulnerability to iron weapons.) The legend of Ragnarr *loðbrók* is also attached to the story of Grímr *loðinkinni* through the mention of Ragnarr's father Sigurðr *hringr*, who had Grímr's son Örvarr-Oddr with him at the Battle of Brávellir. However, the saga-author does not stop with these echoes of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani's relatives by marriage but goes on to include another character with a name from the Völsung legend, Grímr's daughter Brynhildr. Her paternal grandmother was named Hrafnhildr, and rather than bestowing the same name on her, as might have been expected, the saga-author gives his story an Eddic twist by naming her Brynhildr instead. The plot of *Gríms saga* lacks any parallels with the Völ-sung legend, so most likely Grímr's shaggy cheek and his beautiful daughter Brynhildr are details meant to invest a farmer's family with an aura of heroic antiquity. For modern readers, the effectiveness of these touches is undermined by familiarity with the saga about Ketill *hængr*, Grímr's father, because that saga informs us that although the family was a wealthy one, it was descended from trolls, not ancient nobility.⁸ Nonetheless, *Gríms saga* depicts the men of Hrafnista as having gone from being powerful farmers to being rulers treated as equals by kings and lords. It treats this transformation entirely seriously, which accounts for the

importance of the Eddic associations. Chronologically, Grímr is put in the same generation as Buðli, and by being the father of a Brynhildr, he is explicitly positioned as Buðli's counterpart.⁹ At the same time, his hairy cheek makes him a precursor or prefiguration of Ragnarr *loðbrók*. The connections to the legends of Ragnarr and Sigurðr are thus multiple and mutually reinforcing: Grímr does not just resemble Buðli in having a daughter named Brynhildr and not just resemble Ragnarr in having a *loð*-nickname, but his family is depicted as allies and supporters of their family, for Grímr's son fights for Ragnarr's father. Names, structural parallels, and the narrative are used to tie the farmer's family in Hálogaland to the heroes of southern Scandinavia and the Continent as tightly as possible.

Whereas *Gríms saga loðinkinna* associates its protagonist only with the linked legends of Sigurðr and Ragnarr, *Hálfs saga ok Hálfsrekka* uses echoes of the Völsung tradition to bracket a tale drawn out of a larger assortment of heroic myths and stories. The saga opens with the marriage of King Alrek of Hörðaland to Signý, the daughter of a king from Vors, and it closes with the marriage of Hrókr *inn svarti* to Brynhildr, daughter of King Haki of Skåne. In between are references to the legends of Starkaðr, the Hjaðningavíg, Ragnarr *loðbrók*, and Hrómundr Gripsson. Some of these legends are linked by the involvement of Óðinn, who is the progenitor of the Völsungs, the recipient of Starkaðr's sacrifice of King Víkarr, and the instigator of the Hjaðningavíg. Naming a character Signý thus invokes the Völsung legend in order to establish the ancient pagan setting of the story of Hálfr and his champions. In contrast, the appearance of a Brynhildr at the end of the saga invokes the Völsung legend for genealogical reasons, for just as the Brynhildr of *Ragnars saga* is the grandmother of Sigurðr *ormrí-auga*, the ancestor of Haraldr *hárfaði*, the Brynhildr of *Hálfs saga* is the grandmother of the hero Hrómundr Gripsson.

The legend of Hrómundr Gripsson is also paired with the Völsung legend in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, which employs a number of motifs from the latter.¹⁰ The only Völsung name used is that of Sigurðr, which is given to two characters. Significantly, both Sigurðrs are possessed of many of the qualities of the Eddic Sigurðr, but they are not heroes. Like the Sigurðrs of *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, they are to be outshone by the saga's protagonist. The first Sigurðr is a faithful counselor of King Hreggviðr of Novgorod. He is a man of great courage and liked by everyone but is growing old, and he soon dies defending his lord. The second Sigurðr is the son of King Edgar of England. He too is valiant but not lucky, and he is killed in the epic

battle at the end of the saga. The saga's true hero, Göngu-Hrólfr, although having no apparent connections with the Völsung legend, yet finds himself re-enacting many scenes from it. As Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (20) observed, the motifs of the intelligent horse and the sword of chastity are also found in the Völsung legend, but there are other parallels as well that have not been previously noted. Hrólfr offers to obtain Ingigerðr for Jarl Þorgnýr, thus casting himself as Sigurðr to Ingigerðr's Brynhildr and Þorgnýr's Gunnar. A variant of this situation is played out later in the saga, for just as Sigurðr assumes Gunnar's appearance to obtain Brynhildr, in the saga, when Hrólfr's supposed master William is trying to win Gýða, Hrólfr and William have exchanged places, and Hrólfr is performing the tasks required of the suitor in William's stead. When Hrólfr is travelling with Ingigerðr, the two sleep with a sword between them, again like Sigurðr and Brynhildr. Further echoing the Völsung legend is the use of a sleep-thorn, although it is Hrólfr and not the heroine who is cast into a magical slumber. This is also the episode in which Hrólfr's horse Dulcifal saves Hrólfr's life, surpassing the helpfulness of Grani, who merely has the extraordinary strength appropriate to the steed of an extraordinary hero. Finally, a motif from the Völsung legend is deployed elsewhere in the saga when the dwarf Möndul gives Björn's wife a drink that clouds her memory, just as Grímhildr plies Sigurðr with the ale of forgetfulness.

As with many of the other *fornaldarsögur* that evoke the Völsung legend, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* uses these motifs to create a narrative that parallels that of the legend but that ends happily. Björn's wife recovers her memory, and Hrólfr, not Þorgnýr, marries Ingigerðr. And just as many *fornaldarsögur* link their invented heroes with older legends to lend them authenticity, *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* ends by intertwining the later history of Hrólfr's family with the legend of Hrómundr Gripsson. The difference here is that Hrómundr may be an invented hero as well, for *Þorgils saga ok Haflíða* recounts that in 1119, Hrólfr of Skálmarnes recited a saga about Hrómundr Gripsson that he had composed himself (Jesch 305a). The extant saga dates from the seventeenth century and probably is based on late-medieval *rímur*, which may in turn have been based on Hrólfr's work.¹¹

According to *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, Hrómundr will be an ally of Hrólfr's son Óláfr, and the women who treat Hrómundr's wounds are revealed to be Hrólfr's daughters. The Völsung legend thus supplies a significant part of the content of *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*, but not in such a way that the many parallels create the framework by which the saga is

to be understood. Rather, it functions as a ground against which the saga stands; it represents what *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* is not—not a tragedy of ancient heroes, not tainted by malevolent pagan gods or incestuous siblings. The kind of story that *Göngu-Hrólfs saga* aspires to be is indicated by the explicit links to the “legend” of Hrómundr Gripsson, which is new, cheerful, and of Icelandic creation.

Initially equally light-hearted but with fewer Eddic echoes is *Egils saga einhenda ok Ásmundar berserjabana*, which opens with an introduction to the two daughters of King Hertryggr of Russia, Brynhildr and Bekkhildr. The pair must be borrowed from *Völsunga saga* rather than the Poetic Edda, for Bekkhildr does not appear in any of the Eddic poems. As was discussed above, the reason that Brynhildr has a sister in *Völsunga saga* may have been because the saga-author wanted a model of proper behavior for an aristocratic woman, but in *Egils saga einhenda*, the need for a sister arises from the narrative’s having two protagonists. That is, the romance-like *fornaldarsögur* all end with marriages, and each protagonist requires a bride. Although the valkyrie aspect of the original Brynhildr is preserved—the Brynhildr in *Egils saga einhenda* gets her name from being trained in *riddara íþróttir* (knights’ skills) (*FASN* 3, 325)—her name does not seem to be one of ill omen, as it is in the Edda. Another echo of the Völ-sung legend is found in the character of Siggeir, who is both an unpleasant berserk and brother of a king. Again, the Siggeir of *Völsunga saga* seems to have been known to the author of the *fornaldarsaga*, for this Siggeir is a villain like his namesake. A third echo of the Völsung legend is the appearance of a dwarf named Regin, who is employed to rebuild a sword for one of the protagonist-heroes, just as he does in the Edda, and quite likely this character is supposed to be the same dwarf as the Regin of the Völsung legend. But for all the incorporation of Völsung characters and a starting point in the Norse world, we learn that Brynhildr does not live for very long after her marriage. Her husband Ásmundr takes another wife, the daughter of Sultan, king of the Saracens, and Ásmundr’s blood-brother, Egill, and his wife, Bekkhildr, end their days in Tartary. The movement of the story to the exotic world of the East would seem to be a triumph of the genre of Continental romance over the genre of Germanic heroic legend, but if so, it is a brief triumph, for Ásmundr does not live much longer than Brynhildr. In a startling resurgence of Norse myth and legend, he is killed by Óðinn, and his son is killed by Starkaðr, a very Odinic figure. Their deaths may have been dictated by the need to contrast the two protagonists, as the doubled heroes of

fornaldarsögur are never fully equal, or it may reflect a Christian view of the age of pagan heroes as fundamentally oppressive and evil.¹² A third possibility is that the departure of both protagonists from Scandinavia may have been thought necessary for historical reasons, as none of the royal Scandinavian dynasties is said to descend from them. If that is the explanation, then this sensitivity to historical verisimilitude stands in contrast to the attitude of the genealogists who had no compunctions about linking heroes such as Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and Ragnar *loðbrók* to the Scandinavian dynasties and to Icelandic families.

As I have shown, the authors of most of the *fornaldarsögur* under discussion were clearly familiar with the Völsung legend and appear to have deliberately borrowed names and motifs from it. In some cases, the *fornaldarsaga* characters resemble their Eddic namesakes, as with the villainous Siggeirs and Grímhildrs, the noble Sigurðrs, the royal and sometimes martial (Bryn)hildrs, and the Signýs married against their will. Within this category, the Sigurðrs and (Bryn)hildrs differ from their Eddic namesakes in generally being given long and happy lives, although only once (in *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*) are they married to each other.¹³ One might expect that the appearance of these names would create an atmosphere of foreboding, but it almost never does, with the exception of *Egils saga einhenda*, in which Brynhildr lives only a short time after her marriage, and her husband Ásmundr is abruptly and unexpectedly killed by Óðinn.

In other cases, Völsung names are used in *fornaldarsögur* in ways that suggest that the saga-authors considered them as heroic or legendary but not associated with specific stories or events. The author of *Hálfðanar saga Brönufóstra*, for example, did not find it odd to name brothers after a famous pair of father and son or to make Hildr the sister of Sigurðr, despite the fact that in the Völsung legend, Brynhildr and Sigurðr are lovers. Similarly, the author of *Illuga saga Griðarfóstra* gives his hero Sigurðr a wife named Signý, despite the fact that in the Völsung legend, Sigurðr is Signý's nephew. The authors of these *fornaldarsögur* seem to have felt that these names “went together” and the parts that the original figures played were irrelevant.

The present analysis also reveals that *fornaldarsaga* authors were inclined to accept or expand the prior linkage of originally separate heroic traditions. Ragnarr *loðbrók*, his father Sigurðr *hringr*, and his son Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga* do not appear in the Poetic Edda, although they may already have been linked to the Völsung cycle by the early

twelfth century, when Ari Þorgilsson names Sigurðr as a son of Ragnarr *loðbrók*.¹⁴ Nonetheless, names from the Ragnarr legend are found fairly frequently in *fornaldarsögur* that also use names from the Völsung legend. *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar* and *Báttur af Ragnars sonum* go so far as to cite *Ragnars saga* as a source, and possibly *Ragnars saga* also influenced the creation of other *fornaldarsögur* with Eddic echoes that do not mention it. Presumably a chief reason for connecting legendary old Völsung heroes to the new protagonists of the *fornaldarsögur* was to give the latter some credibility or legitimacy as heroes of ancient times, and the same impulse led to *fornaldarsögur* protagonists being linked to the hero Hrómundr Gripsson, although his “legend” was little older than theirs. If the original roles of the figures of the Völsung legend could be overlooked by the authors of the *fornaldarsögur*, all the more so could the origins of the heroes whose names and families were brought in to add luster to that of the *fornaldarsaga* protagonists. As long as a hero was well-known, it made no difference whether his legend arose in the sixth century, as in the case of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani, the ninth century, as in the case of Ragnarr *loðbrók*, or the twelfth century, as in the case of Hrómundr Gripsson.

The propensity to connect *fornaldarsaga* protagonists to other heroes (and even to historical kings, as in the case of *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*) is not at all surprising in the island culture of Iceland, in which the links to the past were carefully cultivated through genealogies and in which the contemporary society of the authors was notable for its intersecting networks of family, marriage, fosterage, friends, and allies both long-term and temporary. The *fornaldarsögur* themselves are sometimes linked genealogically, as in the case of *Gautreks saga* and *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, and *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* and *Friðþjófs saga ins frækna*, which are sagas of fathers and sons, or the case of the so-called *Hrafnistumanna sögur* (The sagas of the people of Hrafnista), which comprise the sagas of a grandfather (*Ketils saga hængs*), his son (*Gríms saga loðinkinna*), and two grandsons (*Örvar-Odds saga* and *Áns saga bogsveigis*). In a similar way, *Bósa saga* turns out to be the saga of Ragnarr *loðbrók*’s father-in-law Herrauðr. The chief example of such secondary development of the Völsung legend is of course the legend of Ragnarr *loðbrók* that lies behind *Ragnars saga*, which invents a daughter of Sigurðr and Brynhildr for Ragnarr to marry. Even *Völsunga saga* itself gives Brynhildr a sister, Bekkhildr, who does not appear in the Poetic Edda. But because the Völsung legend itself is so extensively developed chronologically, going back to Óðinn and forward to

Oddrún's love for Gunnar and Guðrún's third marriage, and because almost every character is killed in the course of the narrative, it was impossible for the *fornaldarsögur* to create sequels or prequels for it, as would otherwise be expected. Instead, the Völsung legend is re-written into "alternative histories" in which characters named Sigurðr and Brynhildr find happiness instead of despair (as in *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs*, *Hálfðanar saga Brönufostra*, and *Illuga saga Griðarfóstra*) or characters with non-Völsung names re-enact scenes from the Völsung legend within a larger narrative that is comic rather than tragic (as in *Göngu-Hrólfs saga*).

Given that Sigurðr is the pre-eminent hero of ancient legend, it might be supposed that his name appears frequently in the *fornaldarsögur* because it also appears frequently elsewhere in West Norse culture. In fact, the distribution is quite irregular. The *Íslendingasögur*—the sagas of Icelanders that take place from the settlement of Iceland to the mid-eleventh century—mention no Icelanders called Sigurðr; the few men with that name are from Norway and Orkney. In contrast, *Sturlunga saga*—the cycle of sagas chronicling the history of Iceland from 1117 to 1264—mentions more than two dozen Icelanders named Sigurðr and more than a dozen named Sigmundr. It is interesting to speculate as to whether the name's heroic associations or Norwegian associations were responsible for its becoming popular in Iceland in this period. If Sigurðr alone had become a common name during this period, when Norway was expanding its power across the North Atlantic and becoming more significant in Icelandic affairs, one might imagine that Icelanders were giving their sons the name of a Norwegian king as a way of bringing that power into their families. In fact, Sigmundr as well as Sigurðr became a fairly common name in Iceland, and therefore the reason for the adoption of both these names is most likely due to the popularity of the Völsung legend.

The situation with the female characters of the Poetic Edda is strikingly different. We have seen that Brynhildr and Hildr were popular names for heroines of the *fornaldarsögur*, whereas no female characters are given the name Guðrún. The popularity of (Bryn)hildr plummets in the *Íslendingasögur*, which mention a single woman named Hildr and none named Brynhildr, and Guðrún continues to be an undesirable—perhaps an unlucky—name for women. Only two women in the *Íslendingasögur* have this name, and one is Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, whose relationship with Kjartan Ólafsson is portrayed in *Laxdæla saga* as clearly parallel to that between Brynhildr and Sigurðr

in the Völsung legend. In contrast, *Sturlunga saga* includes almost forty women named Guðrún. As the name is a minor one in Norway, its late popularity in Iceland may be due to its heroic associations but more likely is due to the unforgettable Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, a figure of queenly beauty, intelligence, and character.¹⁵

Imitation and adaptation of the Völsung legend fluctuated over time.¹⁶ The figure of Sigurðr in particular appears to have been continuously popular, but it is not until the thirteenth century that the rest of the legend is mined for names and motifs for the *fornaldarsögur*. Parallel with that development of interest in the heroic past—seen also in the compilation of the Codex Regius itself and the composition of *Völsunga saga*—is the proliferation of Icelanders named Sigurðr and Sigmundr. A notable gender distinction arose, however, for while Brynhildr and Hildr are frequent names for *fornaldarsaga* heroines, they were names rarely given to Icelandic women, and the popularity of Guðrún as a name most likely had quite a different source. Medieval Icelanders clearly considered that Sigurðr embodied the best heroic qualities, despite his tragic end, and they gave the name to their sons in hopes that it would endow them with those characteristics. In contrast, although the women of heroic legend provided enjoyable entertainment, no Icelandic wanted to name his daughter after such a destructive (and self-destructive) character as Brynhildr, for all her nobility and strength.

Notes

1. For introductions to these legends, see Andersson, Byock, Finch (1993a), Klingenberg, and Gunnell.
2. The term *fornaldarsögur*, literally “sagas of ancient times,” is a modern one customarily rendered in English as “mythic-heroic sagas” or “legendary sagas.” The degree to which the received corpus of *fornaldarsögur* constitutes a literary genre is a subject of debate (Quinn *et al.*). For the purposes of this chapter, I exclude *Norna-Gests þáttur*, *Hversu Noregr byggðist*, *Af Upplendinga konungum*, *Helga þáttur Þórissonar*, and *Sörla þáttur*, which do contain characters who share names with the figures of the Völsung legend. Although these works are edited in the canonical collections of *fornaldarsögur*, I do not consider that they belong to that genre because their structures and themes are those of other genres, even though they include elements of Germanic myth and heroic legend (Rowe 2003, 2004b). *Sögubrot af fornkonungum* also includes such characters, but it is based on *Brávallapula*, a twelfth-century metrical list of names (Skovgaard-Petersen). It thus does have a certain background in the old heroic myths, but it makes for an

anomalous *fornaldarsaga* and is therefore excluded from further consideration here.

3. *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes 50).
4. I am grateful to Carolyne Larrington for sharing her thoughts on this issue.
5. Sigurðr is specifically called the greatest hero in *Frá dauða Sinfjötli, Völsunga saga* (ch. 13 [Finch 1965, 23]), and *Þiðreks saga* (ch. 291 [Bertelsen 347]).
6. After the fragmentary lay of Sigurðr, the compiler of the Codex Regius notes: “Hér er sagt í þessi qviðo frá dauða Sigurðar, oc vícr hér svá til, sem þeir dræpi hann úti. Enn sumir segia svá, at þeir dræpi hann inni í reccio sinni sofanda. Enn þýðverscir menn segia svá, at þeir dræpi hann úti í scógi” [Here in this lay the death of Sigurðr is told of, and here it turns out that they kill him out-of-doors. But some say this, that they kill him indoors, sleeping in his bed. But the Germans say this, that they kill him out-of-doors, in the forest (Neckel and Kuhn 201)].
7. The character named Svanhvít might possibly be meant to echo the Eddic Svanhildr, but as she appears in the story to link Hálfðan’s family with that of the hero Hrómundr Gripsson, the likelihood of an Eddic borrowing seems remote.
8. *Ketils saga hængs* is not the only work that renders the heroic associations of *Gríms saga* ironic or parodic; *Áns saga bogsveigis*, about Ketill hængr’s grandson, also emphasizes the anti-royal, anti-aristocratic potential of the family history.
9. If Ragnarr’s father Sigurðr *hringr* is at the Battle of Brávellir with Grímr’s son Örvar-Oddr, then Sigurd *hringr* is likely to be of the same generation as Örvar-Oddr. Ragnarr would then belong to the third generation, making Grímr his antetype or precursor. If Ragnarr marries Brynhildr’s daughter, then Brynhildr is also of the same generation as Örvar-Oddr, putting Grímr in the same generation as Brynhildr’s father Buðli.
10. A remoter pairing of the legend of Hrómundr Gripsson with the Völsung legend is found in *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinnssonar*, where Hálfðan’s paternal grandmother is identified as Hrómundr’s sister-in-law.
11. The extant saga of Hrómundr Gripsson includes Eddic echoes such as a treasure associated with a pike and a valkyrie-like witch named Lara who helps her lover Helgi in battle, but because the medieval content of the narrative is somewhat uncertain, it is not included in the present analysis.
12. The *þættir* incorporated into the sagas of the missionary kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson usually depict Óðinn as the devil in disguise (Rowe 2005, 68–73, 120–123; Lassen). The status of pagan heroes can be condemned but is not always. For example, *Þorsteins þáttur skelks* depicts Sigurðr and Starkaðr as both suffering in hell, but Sigurðr bears his torments nobly, whereas Starkaðr cannot endure his torture in silence. *Óláfs saga helga sérstaka* (ch. 328) takes a different view and rejects Sigurðr entirely as a suitable figure for Christian poetry (Rowe 2006).
13. Significantly, only *Völsunga saga* itself retains the elements that give the legend such power, namely, the ill-fated love between Sigurðr and Brynhildr and the conflicting obligations to husbands, brothers, and children that force Guðrún into

extremes of revenge time and again. Even *Ragnars saga loðbrók*, which tells the story of Sigurðr and Brynhildr's daughter Áslaug and incorporates a few motifs from the Völsung legend such as the serpent-slaying performed by Áslaug's husband Ragnarr and his death in a snake-pit, does not restage these heroic themes. *Ragnars saga* ends tragically, but the tragedy is that of flawed kingship, not that of the ancient code of honor (Rowe 2012, 211–215).

14. For a discussion of the relationship between the Völsung legend and the names of Ragnarr's father and son, see Rowe (2012, 169–171).
15. For a discussion of Guðrún as queenly, see McTurk (141–144).
16. A large number of *fornaldarsaga* characters share names with the figures of the Eddic legends, including Álöf/Ólöf, Atli, (Kost)bera, Borghildr, Brynhildr, Buðli, Erpr, Gunnar, Guðþormr, Heðin, Helgi, (Bryn)hildr, Hjörleifr, Hjörvarðr, Högni, Regin, Siggeir, Sigmundr, Sigurðr, Svanhildr, Sváva, and Sörli. Nonetheless, not all of these characters seem intended to invoke those legends, even when a saga contains four or five of them. For example, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* includes characters named Hildr, Hjörvarðr, Sigurðr, and Sváva, but Sváva is the wife of Angantýr, who is killed on Samsey along with Hjörvarðr, one of his twelve evil berserker brothers. Hildr is the granddaughter of a later character also named Angantýr; she is the mother of Hjálfdan *snjalli*. Hildr, Hjörvarðr, and Sváva have no discernable parallels with their Eddic namesakes, and the characters named Sigurðr are the father and son of Ragnarr *loðbrók* (Sigurðr *hringr* and Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga*) and so at best are Eddic figures at one remove. With characters named Bryngerðr, Ólöf, Helgi, and Sigurðr, *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* also looks as though it might be echoing Eddic legends, but the two women named Bryngerðr bear no relation to Brynhildr, as one is ugly and the other is the daughter of a faithless and evil man, and there is likewise no reason to associate Ólöf with the daughter of Jarl Franmar known from *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*. The character named Sigurðr turns out to be the Sigurðr *kápa* who is mentioned in *Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* as a retainer and is very unlike the Eddic Sigurðr, and the character named Helgi is taken from *Friðþjófs saga*, the work with which *Þorsteins saga Víkingssonar* is paired. (The latter is commonly regarded as having been composed to serve as an introduction to the former; for the relationship between the two, see Simek and Rowe [2004a].) And if it is the case that *fornaldarsögur* may include several Eddic names without invoking the heroic legends, then it is all the more true of *fornaldarsögur* that include only one or two Eddic names. For example, *Áns saga bogsveigis* contains a character named Erpr, but far from being a young man with brothers, as he is in *Hamðismál*, in the saga, he is an old man who lives on a Norwegian island with no company but his old wife. Erpr is also the name of a very minor character in *Gautreks saga*, where he is one of Víkar's champions. *Áns saga* also mentions a Sigurðr, but he is the Norwegian Sigurðr *bjóðaskalli*; again, no relation to the Eddic hero. Another Sigurðr appears in *Hrólfs saga Gautrekssonar*, where he and his brother are ruthless, malicious men who are the lion-keepers of King Ælla of England and have nothing in common with Sigurðr the Völsung. *Friðþjófs saga* includes characters called Atli and Helgi, but the former is one of Angantýr's Vikings and the latter is a petty king who tries to thwart Friðþjófr's love for his sister. Neither character has any significant relationship to his Eddic namesake.

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Wagner, Morris, and the Sigurd Figure

Confronting Freedom and Uncertainty

David Ashurst

The figure of Sigurðr Fáfnisbani (Slayer of Fáfnir) in his various medieval embodiments loomed large with renewed life during the nineteenth century, above all through the creative work of two men of towering genius, Richard Wagner and William Morris. As will be shown, a comparison of the ways in which Wagner and Morris treated Siegfried-Sigurd, and the significance they vested in him, is revealing; nevertheless, such a comparison has by no means been a staple of critical analysis, no doubt because of the difficulties involved in handling the works' widely divergent media of German music-drama and English narrative verse, and yet the parallels between Wagner and Morris are so striking as to demand a study of the kind offered here. The two men were the outstanding polymaths among the creative minds of the age, each excelling in more than one artistic field and exerting influence well beyond his core disciplines.¹ In the case of each man, the creative work containing the portrayal of the Fáfnisbani persona, respectively *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung) and *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, holds a pre-eminent position in its author's output, and by a curious but apt coincidence these strongly contrasted works were set before the public in one and the same year, 1876.² Both men, furthermore, produced these works on the basis of a deep and detailed knowledge of the Poetic Edda and other Old Norse texts, to which they had given years of thought and painstaking study.³ In addition, both men used the Siegfried-Sigurd

figure as part of their critique of nineteenth-century society and as a means of confronting the period's central issue of freedom, along with the uncertainties that freedom begets; and both were actively involved, at diverse times, in left-wing revolutionary politics. This last point, however, marks a crucial difference in that Morris wrote *Sigurd* while he was aligning himself with the Liberals and when his commitment to Marxism still lay more than half a decade ahead, while Wagner's Siegfried was very much the child of the attempted revolutions of 1848–1849, in which the composer had played a significant role.⁴ A letter to a friend, written on 2 July 1851, shows Wagner's frame of mind less than a fortnight after the text of the third of the four *Ring* dramas, *Der Junge Siegfried*, had been completed:⁵ "I long passionately for the revolution," he proclaimed, "and the only thing that gives me the will to live is the hope of surviving long enough to see it and take part in it" (Spencer and Millington 1987, 226–227).

It is partly as a consequence of this difference in political context and outlook that Morris's *Sigurd* remains closer in spirit to the princely figure of Fáfnisbani in the medieval sources than does Wagner's Siegfried.⁶ The starting point for both writers in their characterization, nevertheless, was the statement to the effect that Sigurðr was the greatest hero of all time in the northern world, which occurs twice in *Völsunga saga* (ed. Finch 23, 41; all subsequent citations are to this edition) and appears in *Þiðreks saga* (ed. Guðni Jónsson 257; all subsequent citations are to this edition) while much the same idea is found in Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (ed. Faulkes 1998, II.1, 46) and in one of the prose passages in the Poetic Edda (Neckel 159; all subsequent citations are to this edition). In Act III of *Die Walküre*, indeed, Wagner makes his Brünnhilde prophesy the birth of Siegfried as the world's noblest hero (ed. and trans. Spencer and Millington 177; hereafter *Ring*). As she does so, she also announces for the first time the musical motif that from this point will be associated with the idea of Siegfried in his glory: it is heard again, blazing out with unsurpassable magnificence, later in the same act when Wotan (Wagner's equivalent of Óðinn) proclaims that no man who fears the god's spear-point will ever pass through the flames that now encircle Brünnhilde's mountaintop (191). Likewise, and with a magnificent euphony of his own, Morris makes an old man herald the imminent birth of Sigurd: "Hail Dawn of the Day! / How many things shalt thou quicken, how many shalt thou slay!" And the name of the hero-to-be, bestowed in that very moment, spreads through the world (May

Morris, ed., *The Collected Works of William Morris*, XII, 66; hereafter *Works*):

O'er meadow and acre it went,
And over the wind-stirred forest and the dearth of the sea-beat bent,
And over the sea-flood's welter, till the folk of the fishers heard,
And the hearts of the isle-abiders on the sun-scorched rocks were stirred.

In several of the medieval sources, the Fáfnisbani figure has not only an aristocratic but also a courtly quality: both *Völsunga saga* (41) and *Þiðreks saga* (256), in closely related passages, remark on the *kurteis* [courtesy, chivalry] that he acquired while he was young, and the *Nibelungenlied* is at pains to stress his full participation in the manners of court life—in the wearing of fine clothes, for example (ed. Bartsch and de Boor sts. 343–366; further references are to this edition). Morris was no more willing than Wagner to trick out his northern hero in the merely decorative fripperies of chivalry, but it suited his purpose to go along with the spirit of this aspect of the sources in presenting his Sigurd as one whose greatness is rooted in society, not separated from it, who becomes a thoughtful, caring, cultured prince, and whose pleasure it is, even in childhood, to sit “Amid talk of weighty matters when the wise men meet for speech; / And joyous he is moreover and blithe and kind with each” (*Works* XII, 67).

Following *Völsunga saga* (22–23) and Snorri's *Skáldskaparmál* (46), Morris places Sigurd's upbringing in the realm of the Helper (i.e., King Hjálprekr), which he characterizes as a “country of cunning craftsmen” blessed with an orderly and cohesive society where “no great store had the franklin, and enough the hireling had,” where a child with gold in its purse “might go unguarded the length and breadth of the land,” and which is safe from outside attack because “men deemed it o'er-well warded” (*Works* XII, 61). Such is Morris's social vision in this poem. Although the land is free from gross inequality, its assumptions are by no means egalitarian; on the contrary, the idea of inherited superiority is crucial to the presentation of Sigurd, who, being the son of King Sigmund, is hailed as “the best sprung forth from the best” (63) and is loved for it: later he is called “the loveliest King of the King-folk” (205), and Morris makes a point of saying, in line with a literal rendering of the clause *hvert barn unni honum hugástum* (*Völsunga saga* 27), that “all children loved him well” (*Works* XII, 206).⁷

One basis for this love is Sigurd's physical beauty, which Morris emphasizes, according to his own estimation, by making him golden-

haired (see 102, 160, 200), whereas medieval descriptions of Sigurðr specify that his hair was brown (*Völsunga saga* 41; *Þiðreks saga* 255).⁸ Wagner, too, requires that his Siegfried be handsome, since he declares in the 1849 essay on “Art and Revolution” that the goal of the great social upheaval, of which Siegfried is elsewhere characterized as the representative, is “the *strong beautiful Man*, to whom *Revolution* shall give his *Strength*, and *Art* his *Beauty*.”⁹ Contrary to the popular conception, however, Wagner’s Siegfried is not blond: his hair color is never specified in the *Ring*, and pictures of the first Siegfried in costume clearly show a brown-haired man (see Spotts 61); the belief that Wagner’s hero is a blond, blue-eyed “Aryan” stems from a later ideology.

Another basis for the people’s love of Sigurd in the Morris poem is that he is a man to whom guile is alien (*Works* XII, 101), who is troubled, after tasting the dragon’s blood, when he perceives the guile and malice of the world (115). This is a leading characteristic that he shares with Wagner’s Siegfried: both writers follow the tradition best exemplified by *Völsunga saga*, which uses Grímhildr’s memory-suppressant potion as a means of partially exonerating Sigurðr from the guilt of betraying Brynhildr, whereas *Þiðreks saga* (307) represents him as having abandoned her for Guðrún in order to make alliance with Guðrún’s brothers, and *Brot* (Fragment of a Poem about Sigurðr), in the Poetic Edda, implies that Sigurðr’s motive may have been the wish eventually to displace Gunnarr (194, st. 8). In both nineteenth-century works, the Sigurðr-Siegfried figure’s release from the effects of the potion (see *Völsunga saga* 50) marks a high point in the story, when the empathy of modern audiences is most powerfully engaged.

As Morris has it, Sigurd, now married to Gudrun, sees Brynhild enter the Niblung hall for the first time, recognizes her, and understands that he must carry the burden of his knowledge for the rest of his life (*Works* XII, 200–201); meanwhile “The Gods look down from heaven, and the lonely King they see, / And sorrow over his sorrow, and rejoice in his majesty” (200). It would be difficult to think of a passage that better encapsulates the personal qualities that allow Sigurd to become a beloved leader and trusted judge of the Niblung people. In Wagner’s treatment of the equivalent scene, much depends on the music: in Act III of *Götterdämmerung* (*Ring* 344), Siegfried has received his deathblow while out in the forest, in accordance with the German tradition of the story mentioned in the Poetic Edda (196), and as the memory of Brünnhilde floods his mind, the music alludes to that which accompanied Brünnhilde’s awakening on her flame-girt

rock in Act III of *Siegfried* (Ring 267; see *Völsunga saga* 35; *Sígrdrífumál*); as she awoke to him then, so he re-awakes to her now. Dying, he is rapt, inward-looking, no longer truly present among the huntsmen who surround him, but audibly a man who has been returned to himself. The passage of orchestral music that follows his death, commonly but inaccurately known as “Siegfried’s Funeral March,” is unequalled in the solemn grandeur of its pathos and leaves one in no doubt that the world has lost someone immeasurably significant.

Morris’s Niblungs, knowing very well the manifestations of Sigurd’s majesty, celebrate the hero as a bringer of law and order, of peace, freedom, and prosperity (161):

Yea, they sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison’s rending and the tyrant laid alow, [...
]

And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at
their will,

And how wives in peace and safety may crop the vine-clad hill.

Even while Sigurd is carrying the burden of his knowledge and sharing the Niblung hall with Brynhild and her husband, “his glory his heart restraineth” (201) so that the people see no sign of his grief (202); and at that time he is all the more “the helper, the overcomer, the righteous sundering sword,” Morris tells us, and “the eye-bright seer of all things, that wasteth every wrong, / The straightener of the crooked, the hammer of the strong” (205–206).

The moral certainty implicit in the lines just quoted flags up an anxiety that surfaces several times in *Sigurd*. The predicament in which the hero finds himself when he is under the effects of Grimhild’s drug is decried as “the eyeless tangle” (222): the phrase neatly sums up the horror of radical uncertainty, in which lines of action cannot be traced, causes cannot be seen, end results cannot be discerned, and the distinction between the eyeless observer and the thing observed is blurred. Bringing about such an “eyeless tangle” is presented in the poem as the worst of actions, in fact, for it is not only Grimhild’s crime but also the thing to which Fafnir and Regin aspired, as shown by the fact that Sigurd, having destroyed them, characterizes them in death not as evildoers but as those who “would blend the good and the ill” (117). It is seen as particularly bad, furthermore, because of the effect it has on those who could otherwise be expected

to judge and act with certainty and righteousness: the situation left behind by Grimhild's plot, for example, is such that "seared is the sight of the wise, / And good is at one with evil till the new-born death shall arise" (205)— the death in question being that of Sigurd, and of Brynhild who brings it about. In this light, it is especially praiseworthy in Sigurd that he is able to recover his clarity of vision in all his dealings on behalf of the Niblung people, in contrast with Gunnar's brother Guttorm (the eventual killer of Sigurd), of whom it is said that he returns from seafaring "and is waxen fierce and strong, / A man in the wars delighting, blind-eyed through right and wrong" (202).

The implied model of polity found in connection with Sigurd, in which a good-looking hereditary aristocrat of proven personal worth gains the love of his people and supplies them with strong paternalistic government that eradicates want and limits inequality while fostering trade, adjudicates fairly and with accurate discernment of right and wrong in all internal disputes, and fiercely repels all external threats, should not, of course, be taken as Morris's real-life response to the challenges of freedom and exploitation in the mid-1870s. Neither should it be dismissed out of hand, however, for it was a model that he clearly cherished and was willing to return to, at least when imagining quasi-medieval worlds, even after many years of commitment to socialism. It can be found in very similar form, for example, in Ralph's kingdom of Upmeads in *The Well at the World's End* (*Works* XIX, 243–244), which was written in 1891–1892. Aspects of it, furthermore, are undeniably attractive, and several remain as social desiderata today.

Wagner the revolutionary, for his part, had no truck with any of this view of polity. It is a striking fact that his Siegfried is a man of action, a warrior, but not a military man, much less a military leader. Nor does he ever seek or utilize political power or formal authority over any person. He has a strong sense of self-worth and in *Götterdämmerung* takes his place naturally beside Gunther (Gunnarr), whom he imagines to be a great man, but he plays no role in public affairs, either in Gunther's realm or among any other peoples. In fact, from first to last, his deeds belong exclusively to the sphere of personal interaction, whether they be acts of violence, such as the killing of Fafner (Fáfnir) and Mime (Reginn), or acts of love and loyalty. The manner in which he forms his bond with Gunther is especially revealing of Siegfried's condition and attitudes prior to his drinking the potion that sunders him from the memory of Brünnhilde

and hence from part of himself. Gunther, who is already minded to use Siegfried in obtaining Brünnhilde (*Ring* 291), makes a courteous if self-serving speech offering the newly arrived hero his father's hall, his inheritance, his lands, and his men in token of allegiance. With no apparent motivation other than respect and desire for friendship, Siegfried accepts this and offers himself in return but notes, in simple truth, that he has neither lands nor men and has inherited nothing but his own body plus a sword that he himself made. He then has to be reminded that he possesses the Nibelung hoard, but he dismisses the treasure as fruitless stuff, most of which he has left lying in a cave (293–294). The contrast between Siegfried and Gunther—or indeed between Siegfried and Morris's Sigurd—could hardly be clearer or more significant.

There are ideological considerations that helped determine the portrayal of Siegfried just exemplified, but it is nevertheless grounded in particular details of the medieval sources Wagner used, as will be demonstrated shortly. What made these aspects of the sources especially attractive to Wagner was the way in which they fitted with the leading ideas of the two men, Proudhon and Feuerbach, who exerted the greatest influence on his thinking while he was writing the *Ring* texts.

It was probably while living in Paris, 1839–1842, that Wagner was introduced to the work of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (Magee 35), who was the first person to call himself an anarchist, and who took the view that the need for leaders, which social animals and primitive man share, can be outgrown when human society achieves a certain level of development, at which point it can be sustained in peace by voluntary co-operation rather than the imposition of government, which inevitably prompts conflict (36). Wagner read, and was profoundly influenced by, Proudhon (39), whose thinking loomed large in the many political conversations Wagner enjoyed during the Dresden period, not least with his close friend August Röckel, whom Wagner himself described as a disciple of Proudhon (Hollinrake 41), and eventually as part of his brief but close association with Mikhail Bakunin, whom he met shortly before the Dresden uprising and who went on to become the most famous anarchist of the century, filled with a passion for destruction, as the necessary preliminary to regeneration, that was already evident to Wagner in 1849 (Magee 39). The upshot for Wagner was that the philosophy of anarchism “came eventually to command his deeply considered allegiance” (39). Proudhon's best-known dictum, that “property is theft,” promulgated

in *Qu'est-ce que la propriété?* (What Is Property?) of 1840, clearly informs the discussion of the Nibelung hoard in an essay that Wagner wrote in summer 1848, just a few months before the first prose sketch for what became the *Ring* cycle (Hollinrake 42), and the slogan became something of an *idée fixe* for Wagner: he was still alluding to it explicitly and drawing new inferences from it in the last days before his death (Gregor-Dellin 519).¹⁰ That Siegfried takes the Ring from the Nibelung hoard becomes the central paradox of the entire cycle. He is told by a forest bird, whose speech he understands after tasting the blood of the dragon, that the Ring can give him power over the whole world (*Ring* 243; compare *Völsunga saga* 33–34; Poetic Edda 182–184; *Nibelungenlied* st. 1124), but the idea has so little hold on his mind that he has forgotten it by the time he locates the Ring and puts it on (*Ring* 246–247). This nevertheless implicates him in property and subjects him to its curse; nor is the situation improved by the fact that he makes no use of the Ring except in giving it to Brünnhilde as a token of love (286), an ambiguous gesture that entangles love with property and has fatal but redemptive consequences for himself and the gods.

It is more difficult to date the beginning of Wagner's interest in the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach, whose book *Das Wesen des Christenthums* (The Essence of Christianity), which appeared in 1841, “proclaimed a new religion of humanity, that is, a theological outlook in which God was perceived as a projection of the hopes and needs of men and women themselves, and asserted the supremacy of love over the law” (Millington 24). He was certainly aware of it in his Dresden days—Bakunin was an “ardent Feuerbachian” in this phase of his life (Hollinrake 42)—but it was only from 1849, in his Swiss exile, that Wagner fully immersed himself in Feuerbach's writings (Magee 51). The result was an admiration so strong that Wagner included in the revised version of *Siegfrieds Tod* the so-called “Feuerbach ending,” in which Brünnhilde, about to immolate herself, urges humankind to understand that she has bequeathed love to a world without rulers, from which the gods have passed away (*Ring* 362–363). These particular lines were eventually removed, but the ideas remain in the stage action and the music of the finished *Ring* (348–351). And long after the writing of the *Ring* text, Wagner himself summed up, in his 1865 autobiography, what the reading of *Das Wesen* had meant for him: “From that day onward I always regarded Feuerbach as the ideal exponent of the radical release of the individual from the thralldom of accepted notions, founded on the belief in authority” (Wagner 1911,

Crucial among the aspects of the medieval sources that caught Wagner's attention in the light of Proudhon's and Feuerbach's ideologies is the account, in *Þiðreks saga* (231–236), of how the newly born Sigurðr had been cast out but was found by a hind and suckled by her for a year, at which point he was discovered out in the forest by Mímir the smith, who then raised him in his workshop until he was old enough to perform the dragon-slaying. This allowed Wagner to dispense with Hjálprekr and his court, who play no part in Sigurðr's upbringing in *Þiðreks saga*. Instead of being brought up in a royal household where he could be socialized by an admiring populace, as in the case of Morris's Sigurd, and grow accustomed to the evils of property, Siegfried is raised in conditions of the utmost social deprivation, totally isolated from human society in an underground smithy: Wagner simply turned Mímir the man into Mime of the race of dwarfs, and left Siegfried perpetually alone with him by removing the wife and apprentices (*sveinar*) that are mentioned in the passage from *Þiðreks saga*.¹²

The saga account, with its hind and its forest setting, also allowed Wagner, as the inheritor of German Romanticism, to make his young hero a child of nature: in Act I of *Siegfried* we see the boy drawing important conclusions about sex, companionship, and heredity from what he has observed of birds and animals in the forest and using this as the basis for taking steps toward freedom from his exploitative fosterer (*Ring* 201–203); more generally, the entire relationship between Siegfried and the dwarf, as dramatized by Wagner, is an essay on the nature/nurture controversy, the conclusion in this case being that the boy grows up true, brave, and generous of spirit despite being subject to the constant example of a dissembling embittered coward.

That Siegfried treats the dwarf in a more rumbustious and aggressive manner than many people are quite comfortable with, furthermore, also stems from *Þiðreks saga*, which says that Sigurðr was so difficult to manage that he dominated Mímir's apprentices and forced them into subjection, retaliating against the strongest, who had struck him, by forcing the apprentice to the ground and then running along while dragging him by the hair (I, 232–233). In the saga context, these details are doubtless meant to excite the audience's approbation and to be taken as evidence of Sigurðr's high birth, since mettlesome and overbearing behavior in children is the natural consequence of good blood: the topos can be found, for example, in

Sturlunga saga (ed. Jón Jóhannesson *et al.* I, 5–7), where a king's two sons are brought up as the children of a thrall while the thrall's son is reared as a prince; at an early age, they make the thrall-prince cry by taking away the gold ring that he has been playing with, and this prompts the king to accept them as his own true offspring. For Wagner, too, the young hero's unmanageable behavior indicates his good blood or, putting it another way, that he is made of the right stuff: as Wagner has it, he is the grandson, not merely the descendant, of Wotan. Siegfried, however, does nothing quite so pettily violent as Sigurðr in the passage from *Þiðreks saga* just mentioned; instead he playfully sets a live bear on Mime, to give him a fright before rescuing him and driving the animal away (*Ring* 196–197), and is generally truculent toward him—and eventually kills him (251) as in all the Old Norse sources and in Morris (*Works* XII, 117).

As Tanner remarks, it would be interesting to see how people who dislike Siegfried's conduct would behave toward “a whining little creature (smallness isn't necessarily charming) who spent half his time complaining about their ingratitude, was unwilling to answer their questions as to where they came from, and was furthermore the only company available to them” (135). The point Wagner clearly wishes to make is rather more positive than this, however, for it is that Siegfried's behavior is the natural and good response of such a man to his inhuman fosterer's loathsome hypocrisy—the response that is fully *human* in the Feuerbachian sense of the term, and which became appropriate for the hero once Wagner had encountered Old Norse literature. Under its influence, rather than that of German works such as the *Nibelungenlied*, he had come to feel that the Siegfried-Sigurðr figure had emerged for him “in its purest human shape,” as he wrote in an essay of 1851.¹³ The Feuerbachian concept of the supremacy of love, furthermore, is in play here, albeit in a negative manner: Siegfried begins to love—swiftly, easily, and naturally (although there is the problematic issue of property and the giving of the Ring as a love token)—when he eventually encounters Brünnhilde (*Ring* 267–276), but he has no love for Mime, the only person he has ever met, because Mime confronts him all the time with wheedling assurances of love while in fact his motives are entirely selfish and his so-called love is nothing but opportunism and manipulation. Siegfried instinctively perceives the falseness of this love and rejects it emphatically (236).

At the same time, the fact that Sigurðr in *Þiðreks saga* is difficult to manage becomes, in Wagner's Siegfried, a total immunity to the demands of authority, which is in line with Feuerbach's “radical

release of the individual” and equally with Proudhon’s declaration, concerning himself, that his conscience was his own, his justice was his own, and his freedom was a sovereign freedom (see Woodcock 98). Again the crucial factor in the formation of Siegfried’s personality, apart from what we would now call genetic programming, is that Mime is the boy’s sole authority figure and is utterly unacceptable in that role: at one point, Mime himself unwittingly reveals the root of his own failure by telling Siegfried that he should obey the one who has always been kind to him (*Ring* 198), the problem being that Mime has never once been truly kind. That Wagner is not suggesting that Siegfried simply needs a better authority figure, furthermore, but is radically rejecting “the thralldom of accepted notions, founded on the belief in authority,” in accordance with his own reading of Feuerbach, is shown by the fact that when Siegfried comes to forge his sword he rejects all the teaching of the master smith and returns to first principles: that the methodology he invents could hardly produce a decent blade and yet does so is the essential point of this lengthy episode (220–228), for all authority is to be rejected as the basis for action, even when that authority is founded on experience. As before, there could hardly be a greater contrast with Morris’s portrayal of Sigurd, who learns from his foster father everything appropriate for “the sons of kings,” including the smithying of swords and corselets, carving runes, speaking many languages, “soft speech for men’s delight,” playing the harp, and “the winding ways of song” (*Works* XII, 68, based on *Völsunga saga* 23); for whereas Morris, following *Völsunga saga*, wants to present us with a lovable and cultured prince whose temperate rule we could accept, Wagner, taking his cue from *Þiðreks saga*, confronts us with what Shaw (200) called “a born anarchist,” and hopes that we may respond like Brünnhilde, who declares that, laughing, she must love the childlike hero (*Ring* 275).

The other crucial matter in Wagner’s portrayal of Siegfried is the idea that the hero was, in the most literal sense, fearless. Both *Völsunga saga* and *Þiðreks saga* state that Sigurðr was never afraid (41 and 256, respectively); additionally, in *Völsunga saga*, Brynhildr tells Sigurðr, who has just wakened her from the sleep that Óðinn had brought on her, that she had sworn an oath to marry no man who could be afraid, the implication being that Sigurðr is that man (35), and the same motif occurs in connection with Sigdrífa and Sigurðr in the Poetic Edda (186). Morris too was aware of this detail, of course, but chose to play it down in his poem, where Brynhild tells Sigurd,

“The fearless heart shall I wed” (*Works* XII, 125), and where Gripir the seer hails Sigurd with the words, “O fair, O fearless, O mighty” (99); thus, the motif is reduced to little more than a turn of phrase. Wagner, in contrast, makes the complete absence of fear a leading element in Siegfried’s character, to the extent that the possibility of learning fear in the presence of the dragon, rather than the promise of gaining wealth from him as *Völsunga saga* has it (24), becomes the reason for seeking out Fafner in his lair (*Ring* 218–219, 234–236, 240, 247).

That Siegfried lacks so important a characteristic as the ability to fear seems, *prima facie*, to be at odds with the idea that he is the fully human being. As Wagner treats the motif, however, there is a complex relationship between fearlessness and love, which is verbalized but not quite formulated by Wotan in his confrontation with Erda in Act III of *Siegfried*, when the god wakes the seeress and questions her about the impending destruction of divine power—the scene imaginatively re-works the main concept of the Eddic poems *Völuspá* (indeed Wotan addresses the goddess as Wala; *Ring* 254) and *Baldurs draumar*. Confronting Erda’s ancient wisdom with his own hard-won understanding, Wotan declares that the curse on the Ring has no power over Siegfried, who is love-happy and without envy, for fear is unknown to him (*Ring* 258). The god’s understanding can be questioned, in fact, but the nexus of ideas is clear: fearlessness, freedom, joy, love. A variation of the thought, making room for the strength that is one of Siegfried’s leading characteristics, occurs in Wagner’s 1849 essay “Art and Revolution” (Ellis I, 57, with original emphasis):

Only the *Strong* know *Love*. [...] The love of weaklings for each other can only manifest itself in the goad of lust; the love of the weak for the strong is abasement and fear; the love of the strong for the weak is pity and forbearance; but the love of the strong for the strong is *Love*, for it is the free surrender to one who cannot compel us.

Hence, the love between Siegfried, the strong beautiful man, and Brünnhilde, whom Wagner treats as the valkyrie daughter of Wotan, is the real thing whereas that between Siegfried and Gutrune (Guðrún), whom Wagner presents as no more than a timorous female adjunct to Gunther, is not. The relationship between fearlessness, strength, and love as played out in the *Ring* is more complex than this, however, for in the final scene of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde is newly awakened as a mortal woman, no longer a valkyrie, and has to struggle with a dread of pollution until her love of the childlike hero allows her to cast fear

aside and embrace mortality (*Ring* 270–275); thus, in true Feuerbachian style, she is impelled by the need/necessity (*Noth*) of love to ascend from mere godhead to the higher and better state of being fully human. Likewise, Siegfried himself experiences a spasm of fear, for the first and last time in his life, when desire comes on him as he perceives that the sleeping Brünnhilde is a woman, not a man as he had assumed (266); as long as the awakened Brünnhilde then struggles with herself, he is gripped by the fear of rejection (269), but when she gives herself to him his courage returns and he can no longer remember what fear was like (275). Thus his lack of fear allows Siegfried to pass through the wall of fire to Brünnhilde, where love first allows him to learn the fear that he had lacked and then to forget it again so that he can continue untrammelled in his conscious mind, yet completed in the depth of his humanity.

This is a great deal to have derived from a single phrase in the medieval sources, but it is typical of the way Wagner worked; nor does the above discussion exhaust the topic of his hero's fearlessness. It has already been shown how Siegfried's upbringing, as treated by Wagner on the basis of *Þiðreks saga*, left the youth with no *respect* for authority; neither, it remains to note, has Siegfried any *fear* of authority, no matter how powerful, or of the consequences of opposing it. In order to work through the full implications of this, Wagner supplies a scene in which Wotan confronts Siegfried as an enemy (*Siegfried* Act III, sc. 2; *Ring* 258–264), an episode that is not directly derived from any medieval source although the basic idea of a meeting between the two characters stems from *Völsunga saga* (28, 30), in which Óðinn intervenes to assist Sigurðr. As Wagner treats the subject, Wotan, without naming himself, bars the way when Siegfried seeks to ascend the mountain at the top of which Brünnhilde still sleeps surrounded by fire; the encounter soon leads to a tussle in which Wotan's spear, the symbol of his power, is shattered by the sword that Siegfried has forged for himself, and the god withdraws. In the previous scene it is implied that Wotan has planned the encounter and expects this outcome (*Ring* 258), yet his actions do not represent a simple abdication since the depth of Siegfried's contempt takes the god by surprise and wakens his wrath so that, when it comes to it, he resists in earnest but to no avail (262–264): angry or not, willing or unwilling, the god finds himself powerless before the strong and fearless man. In this way, Wagner affirms the alignment of his political message with the ideas of Proudhon, for here the ruler is swept away by one who will neither rule nor be ruled. At the same

time, Feuerbach is evoked because here the divine gives way to the human. In addition, Feuerbach's thought lies behind the symbolism of the shattering of the spear, for Wotan himself has by this time declared not only that he rules the world through the weapon's point (i.e., the threat of violence) but that the legal basis of his authority is codified in runes carved on its shaft (211); Siegfried's way to Brünnhilde is therefore barred by the letter of the law, and his destruction of that law allows him to ascend toward love.

It is the dismissal of Wotan's power, not the dragon-slaying, that is the true climax of Siegfried's heroic career, as indeed the glorious music that depicts his ascent of the mountain and passage through the fire eloquently proclaims; and yet Siegfried himself is unaware of precisely what he has done, since he does not recognize Wotan and seems to have no knowledge of the divine powers until after he has met Brünnhilde. Nor does he ever name the gods or honor them at any point in the *Ring* although on the day of his death he implies that he has learned the significance of the spear's destruction and takes pleasure in the fact (336).

In marked contrast to this indifference or pugnacity toward divinities, Morris's Sigurd maintains a wary piety despite the fact that the gods, in Morris's poem as in the Old Norse sources, play a role that is by no means morally unambiguous or benevolent. The appropriate attitude to be shown toward them, it seems, is outlined by Brynhild in the advice she gives Sigurd at their first meeting (*Works* XII, 127):

Love thou the Gods—and withstand them, lest thy fame should
fail in the end,

And thou be but their thrall and their bondsman, who wert born
for their very friend.

By implying that the gods can be tyrannical, Brynhild partly agrees with their enemy Regin, who tells Sigurd that Loki "gathered his godhead together" in order to kill Otter because he recognized in him "a king of the free and the careless" (77). Sigurd, nevertheless, has already given his allegiance to the gods as their friend: when he meets Odin, Sigurd declares that he will slay Fafnir for the god's sake, and adds, "I love thee, friend of my fathers, Wise Heart of the holy folk" (109); and he addresses Regin as "Foe of the Gods" moments before cutting off his head (117). Far from representing a higher order in opposition to the gods and to their enemies while maintaining a certain indifference to both, as Wagner's Siegfried does, Morris's

Sigurd exhibits a heartfelt identification with the cause of the gods and fights on their behalf. In striking the blows against Regin and Fafnir, however, Sigurd is performing acts of which the gods themselves seem incapable, for apart from their one ill-judged adventure concerning the kindred of Otter, they exhibit a strange passivity in this narrative; and the value of their friendship, furthermore, is to be doubted. As the dying Fafnir says with the percipience of the fey (111):

I have seen the Gods of heaven, and their Norns withal I know:
They love and withhold their helping, they hate and refrain the
blow;
They curse and they may not sunder, they bless and they shall not
blend;
They have fashioned the good and the evil; they abide the change
and the end.

In Sigurd's case this surely proves true, as shown by the passage, quoted above, that says the gods look down from heaven, when the effects of Grimhild's potion have worn off him, and that they sorrow and rejoice in his sorrow and his majesty (200). Morris goes on to say that "nought now shall blind or help him, and the tale shall be to tell" (201). Thus, when his vision has cleared, he sees the gods as they are and knows that they will listen and watch and sympathize, but they will not help. He has fought for them, but they will not fight for him; yet he does not condemn them, much less seek to destroy them, rather he accepts his lot, as they do, for "he seeth the ways of the burden till the last of the uttermost end" (201). Such is the nature of Sigurd's piety.

As mentioned above, one foil to this highly moral Sigurd is his brother-in-law Guttorm, who fights without regard for the ethical dimensions of the struggle. A different foil is Sinfiotli, whom Morris, following *Völsunga saga*, treats as Sigurd's half-brother and the product of the incestuous union between Sigmund and his sister Signy, but whom Wagner conflates with Siegfried, making the dragon-slayer himself the son of Siegmund and his twin sister Sieglinde. Wagner's change to the parentage of the central hero is not merely incidental but marks a sharp difference between the ethical program of his work in contrast to that of Morris.

Concerning the begetting of Sinfiotli, Morris makes fully explicit what *Völsunga saga* (9–10, 13–14) strongly implies—that Signy's

motive in changing her appearance and seducing her brother, *incognito*, is to produce a stronger boy than she can conceive with Siggeir her husband, so that the child can grow into a suitable helper for Sigmund in his vengeance against Siggeir (*Works* XII, 27). The child of this union does indeed live up to his mother's expectations, but it is significant that Morris reserves the phrase "the best sprung forth from the best" (63, mentioned earlier) for Sigurd, the legitimate son of Sigmund; there is, moreover, a carefully worked implication that Sinfiotli is Sigurd's moral inferior, in that he brutally kills the little children who discover his hiding-place in Siggeir's hall (36–37, based on *Völsunga saga* 12) whereas the other child-slayings in the saga are eliminated by Morris.

Wagner's treatment of the incest between Siegmund and Sieglinde is quite different and is crucial to the scheme of the *Ring*. What Wagner presents us with is a passionate love-match born out of intense unhappiness, and here the eventual recognition of kinship, following the declaration of love, functions as the ultimate ratification of mutual belonging (*Ring* 122–139). The affirmative nature of the music at this point is unmistakable, but in the wider context of the drama the twins' love is problematized as transgressive: hence, there is the lengthy argument between Fricka (Frigg), the ultimately victorious guardian of legal marriage, and Wotan, the father and would-be protector of the twins but also the reluctant upholder of the laws that he himself has negotiated (141–147); hence also, the death of Siegmund follows as a result of Wotan's forced withdrawal of his favor (166–167). On the one hand, therefore, Wagner presents the love of Siegmund and Sieglinde as a *transcendence* of law—in Feuerbach's terms, as a new moral order into which the lovers have been impelled by highest *Noth*—but on the other hand he treats it also as a *transgression* of law, from which the lovers are by no means free, and which swiftly destroys their union. Thus he uses the incest theme in *Völsunga saga* to confront fundamental issues of freedom and the uncertainty of moral action, doing so by dramatizing irreconcilable responses to the issues. For Siegmund, indeed for Wotan as it turns out, there is no answer to the problem Wagner has formulated, but Wagner goes on to assert that out of this tragedy an answer does arise, and it is not a set of propositions but a person: Siegfried, the product of transcendent, transgressive love.

That love is central to the ultimate significance of both the *Ring* and *Sigurd* is certain; neither Wagner nor Morris, however, treats it in a way that offers much comfort to their audiences. Assuredly they do

not present it as a panacea for the sufferings of the world or, in any simple way, a solution to the world's problems. *Sigurd*, in particular, lends little support to the idea that "love is enough," even though this phrase formed the title of a major poetical work that Morris published in 1873, just three years before the Volsung poem (*Works* IX, 1–89); instead it runs true to Morris's own summing up of the medieval source material as a tale "of utter love defeated utterly" (*Works* VII, 290). If it is correct, as Morris claimed, that the source material forms "the great Epic of the North" (283), then *Sigurd* has the unusual distinction of being an epic of defeat, and it is its treatment of love that makes it so; yet this is precisely what Morris invites us to enjoy, for the basis of his poem is "the best tale pity ever wrought" (290).

The telling of the tale is in fact the crucial concept that runs throughout *Sigurd*. It is touched on by Odin, in the first episode of the poem, when he plunges a sword into the bole of the tree that grows in King Volsung's hall and declares that it will never fail its owner until *ragnarök* "and the ending of the tale," thus characterizing the gods themselves and the whole history of their cosmos as the stuff of narrative art (*Works* XII, 5). Signy, in steeling her brother Sigmund for the years of suffering ahead of him, develops the theme by declaring that even after *ragnarök* the memories of this life, as it now is, will remain clear and be transformed into a story that will never grow stale (22–23). In addition, Sigurd himself, as mentioned above, sees that "the tale shall be to tell" and that nothing can rightfully be done to change its factual basis, whether past or future, when Grimhild's potion wears off and he remembers his love for Brynhild (201). Referring to his death and the cause of it in his final speech, furthermore, Sigurd links love, the recollection of actions that cannot now be altered, and the making of a tale (230): "'It is Brynhild's deed,' he murmured, 'and the woman that loves me well; / Nought now is left to repent of, and the tale abides to tell.'" Thus, to sum up, in this poem, Morris presents a beloved leader who bestows limited freedom on his people while his own freedom is severely curtailed by his belief that acceptance is the appropriate moral response to his circumstances, who abominates the blending of good with evil and strives to maintain or establish clear distinctions, by force if necessary, and who, as "the eye-bright seer of all things" (205), effectively becomes an audience to his own story, hearing all, knowing all, feeling all but changing nothing; and the story itself is the best of all because it is the most piteous of all, for at its heart is the utter defeat of utter love.

To arrive at a view on the ultimate meaning of the *Ring*, and of love's place within it, is more difficult. Wagner himself, with his restless and perpetually theorizing mind forever on the lookout for new ideas to assimilate from his vast reading, made several attempts over the years to formulate the essential message of the entire colossal drama. All of these are necessarily reductive and some are strained, but the most plausible is one contained in a letter to August Röckel, dated 25–26 January 1854 (Spencer and Millington 1987, 307):

Wodan (sic.) rises to the tragic heights of *willing* his own destruction. This is all we need to learn from the history of mankind: *to will what is necessary* and to bring it about ourselves. The final creative product of this supreme, self-destructive will is a *fearless* human being, one who never ceases to *love*: *Siegfried*. [...] Not even Siegfried alone (man alone) is the complete “human being”: he is merely the half, only with *Brünnhilde* does he become the redeemer; *one* man alone cannot do everything; many are needed, and a suffering, self-immolating woman finally becomes the true, conscious redeemer: for it is love which is really “the eternal feminine” itself.¹⁴

In line with these comments, it may reasonably be said that Siegfried's active role as a redeemer is finished by the end of the drama that bears his name, and that *Götterdämmerung* is chiefly Brünnhilde's story. For most of the final drama, Siegfried is a man lost to himself because of the drug he has been given, while Brünnhilde plays out the great melodrama of her jealousy and vengeance, plotting Siegfried's death and finally burning herself on his funeral pyre after learning the truth and reaffirming her love: her tale is essentially that of *Völsunga saga* (46–61) with the crucial difference that before leaping into the flames, she becomes “the true, conscious redeemer” by taking on herself the Ring of universal power and commanding the fire god Loge to burn Walhall, where her father Wotan calmly waits (*Ring* 349–351, and see 303). Thus Brünnhilde brings an end to the gods, in this radically re-thought version of *ragnarök*; it should be remembered, however, that she is actualizing what has already been achieved by Siegfried, for the power of Wotan had been broken when Siegfried shattered his spear. Although the details of the final tragedy remain to be worked through and its passions remain to be felt, everything is in place for the downfall of the gods by the time the newly met lovers make their avowals in the last scene of *Siegfried*. Brünnhilde herself makes this clear, for although she no longer has the power of exact prophecy she possessed while still a valkyrie, or such as is displayed by Brynhildr in *Völsunga saga* (46), she understands that her union with Siegfried will be the death of them both—and she embraces it

joyfully. Having affirmed her choice, she goes on to name the events that will shortly come to pass, bidding each one take place: the destruction of Walhall, the departure of divine pomp, the ending of the divine race, the rending of the Norns' rope of fate, and the coming of dusk on the gods. This is the context of her final utterance, which both completes the list and responds to it by hailing Siegfried as love filled with light, and death filled with laughter (all *Ring* 275). Hence, Brünnhilde is already semi-conscious of her destiny as one half of the redeeming pair.

Alongside these exclamations—for at this euphoric moment Wagner allows his characters to sing simultaneously in the manner of an operatic duet—Siegfried is allotted parallel lines that neatly point up the difference between the conscious and the unconscious redeemers. Focusing wholly on the fact of Brünnhilde and the glorious world that contains her, he acknowledges nothing of the gods and seems to hear nothing she says about the approach of doom, and yet his thoughts, through no conscious logic, reach the same destination concerning love and death (276); in fact, as the musical score shows, it is Siegfried who takes the lead in singing the phrase concerning love and light, and then the two lovers simultaneously utter the phrase about death and laughter (Edition Eulenburg 1156–1157). This is all of a piece with the nature he has displayed throughout the drama, for he has forged a sword without knowing the art, he has killed a dragon without learning fear, he has claimed the Ring that bestows universal power but has forgotten what it is for, under the shock of desire he has finally learned fear but forgotten that too, and above all he has confronted the supreme god and broken his power without knowing who it was that opposed him. So now he reaches his highest point as the loving fearless product of the “self-destructive will” that redeems the world, unconscious of the future but knowing and joyfully affirming the unity that is his own heroic essence: shining love, laughing death.

Notes

1. The classic biography of Wagner—composer, dramatist, conductor, musical theoretician, stage designer, political revolutionary, exile, animal-rights activist, cultural commentator, and ultimately *Meister* of Bayreuth—is Newman 1933–1947, while Gutman and Gregor-Dellin, among many others, offer more recent

and strongly contrasted lives. That of Morris—designer, poet, businessman, conservationist, translator, Marxist, and ultimately the progenitor of modern fantasy literature—is Mackail; see also E. P. Thompson and MacCarthy.

2. For a history of the Bayreuth Festival, where the *Ring* was first performed and is still staged every year whereas Wagner's other mature works are given on a rotation basis, see Spotts. For the date of *Sigurd* (the first edition states 1877), see LeMire 68–69; for the importance of the poem among Morris's works, see Mackail I, 311, and Paul Thompson 200, 206.
3. For a chronology of Wagner's three decades of work on the *Ring*, see Spencer and Millington 2000, 9–10. Árni Björnsson's scene-by-scene analysis of the four *Ring* dramas in comparison with the medieval sources goes some way toward illustrating the depth of Wagner's knowledge and the subtlety of the connections he was able to make (128–270). For an account of Morris's interest in Old Norse literature, his translation of *Völsunga saga* and the composition of *Sigurd*, see Ashurst; Kennedy 77–105, sets Morris in context as one of the most influential translators of Old Norse.
4. See Gregor-Dellin (144–243) for a vivid account of Wagner's revolutionary activities and their aftermath. Morris joined the Social Democratic Federation in January 1883 and left it to found the Socialist League in December 1884; see E. P. Thompson 275–579 for an account of his most active period as a socialist campaigner.
5. The four dramas are *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold), *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods), the last two being called *Der Junge Siegfried* (Young Siegfried) and *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfried's Death) prior to revision. A succinct account of the stages by which the *Ring* reached its definitive form is offered by Darcy.
6. Morris was aware of Wagner's work on the *Ring* and discussed it with family and friends over a period of decades, his stance being strongly critical and the focus of the discussions being on aesthetic issues rather than the socio-political aspects of the dramas (see ed. May Morris XII, viii–ix). His position on these matters never changed substantially from those set out in a letter to H. Buxton Forman, dated 12 November 1873 (Henderson 60–61). As the letter makes clear, Morris had little faith in the power of complex music to convey “the unspeakable woes of Sigurd, which even the simplest words are not typical enough to express”; furthermore he abominated the objectification involved in bringing “such a tremendous and world-wide subject under the gaslights of an opera.” Wagner, for his part, had no direct access to Morris's writings (his English was no more than rudimentary), but he probably knew of *Sigurd* since he was in London a few months after its publication and during that time his wife asked to meet Morris at the house of a mutual friend; Morris duly attended a dinner there on 1 June 1877, and the host reported that the *grande dame* “was most charming [...] and delighted to have him next to her at table” (Lindsay 219). In her diary entry for that date, Frau Wagner herself simply notes the presence of “the writer Mr Morris,” thus showing that she did not think of Morris primarily as a designer (Skelton 284). Her diary also indicates that during the previous three days she had been sitting for Morris's close friend, the artist Burne-Jones; doubtless she would have heard about *Sigurd* then if not before, and would have mentioned the

poem to her husband.

7. The phrase *hvert barn*, literally “every child,” probably has the sense “one and all,” and is so rendered by Finch.
8. The change made by Morris may have something to do with the nineteenth-century concept of the solar hero (Hodgson 78); it should be noted, however, that many of Morris’s most handsome male characters are blond.
9. Ellis I, 56. Ellis’s translation of the first phrase is in fact “the strong fair Man,” but this is potentially misleading.
10. For an overview of Proudhon’s thinking, see Woodcock 98–133.
11. For a study of Feuerbach’s work, see Wartofsky.
12. The prose introduction to *Reginsmál* in the Poetic Edda (169) gave Wagner the idea by stating that Sigurðr’s fosterer Reginn was *dvergr of vöxt* “a dwarf in stature”; for Wagner, as in Old Norse mythology, dwarfs are a race separate from humankind. Árni Björnsson seems to have missed this detail (see 142–143).
13. Ellis I, 358–359. The remark, from “A Communication to my Friends,” post-dates Wagner’s study of Feuerbach and was written a month or two after the original text of *Der Junge Siegfried*. See Spencer and Millington 2000, 9.
14. Here the references to the will and its negation suggest some contact with the philosophy of Schopenhauer’s 1819 book *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation); the letter, however, predates Wagner’s reading of this work, which he undertook in October 1854. See Magee, especially 126–204, for a discussion of the relationship between Wagner’s thought and Schopenhauer’s. There is no doubt that Schopenhauer became the main influence on the later part of Wagner’s life, but his impact on the *Ring* can be overstated (and perhaps is so by Magee); what he gave Wagner in connection with the *Ring* was chiefly a new perspective on things that were already there, or confirmation of what he had already intuited.

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Writing into the Gap

Tolkien's Reconstruction of the Legends of Sigurd and Gudrún

Tom Shippey

The Saga of the Völsungs and the Codex Regius

Tolkien's interest in the Völsungs, like most of his interests, began early. On 17 February 1911, he read a paper to his school Literary Society on the Norse sagas. The three-paragraph summary of it printed in the *King Edward's School Chronicle* for 20–21 March 1911 reports him as having said that:

One of the best [of the sagas] (and it is distinct from all the rest) is the Völsunga Saga, a strange and glorious tale. It tells of the oldest of treasure hunts: the quest of the red gold of Andvari, the dwarf. It tells of the brave Sigurd Fafnirbane, who was cursed by the possession of this gold, who, in spite of his greatness, had no happiness from his love for Brynhild. The Saga tells of this and many another strange and thrilling thing. It shows us the highest epic genius struggling out of savagery into complete and conscious humanity. Though inferior to Homer in most respects, though as a whole the Northern epic has not the charm and delight of the Southern, yet in a certain bare veracity it excels it, and also in the story of the Volsungs in the handling of the love interest. There is no scene in Homer like the final tragedy of Sigurd and Brynhild.¹

Tolkien had in fact known a version of the saga even earlier, in childhood, in the form of "The Story of Sigurd," the condensed and censored version created by Andrew Lang from William Morris's 1870 translation and printed by him in his collection *The Red Fairy Book*

(1890). Tolkien comments in one version of his essay “On Fairy Stories” that this was “my favourite without rival” (J. R. R. Tolkien 2008, 188), though in the later published text, his reference to Lang’s abridgement, quoted at the beginning of Christopher Tolkien’s “Foreword” to *Sigurd and Gudrún*, is no longer explicit (3, from J. R. R. Tolkien 1964, 39). It may well be that his 1911 enthusiasm was caused by having only recently read Morris’s full 1870 version.²

Nevertheless, when (in Christopher’s judgment sometime in the early 1930s) Tolkien Sr. came to write *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, largely based on the saga but now in what may have been the legend’s original poetic meter, he seems to have changed his mind. Christopher notes that his father “did not hold the [*Völsunga saga*] author’s artistic capacity in high regard” (2009, 39), adding his own comment immediately afterward that the saga narrative “is certainly mysterious but (in its central point) unsatisfying: as it were a puzzle that is presented as completed but in which the looked for design is incomprehensible and at odds with itself.” (See the final paragraph below for what this unstated “central point” may have been.)

The early enthusiastic response and the later critical one are, however, not incompatible. *Völsunga saga* is unquestionably full of interest, as a story, and in a way it is the more interesting because of its evident faults, for what these do is prove that the saga as we have it is at the end of a chain of transmission, in which different authors have grafted in originally separate stories, put forward their own explanations, and created inconsistencies while trying to eliminate yet others. The saga is therefore at the same time the work of a single author and the product of an unknown succession of them: just the situation that Tolkien himself tried to imitate when creating *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien commented twice on what kind of effect such long-chain productions have on an eventual reader only dimly aware of how they have been produced, and it is clear that he valued the mysterious and barely imitable effect highly. In “The Notion Club Papers,” Ramer says—and here surely he is a mouthpiece for Tolkien:

I don’t think you realize, I don’t think any of us realize, the force, the daimonic force that the great myths and legends have. From the profundity of the emotions and perceptions that begot them, and from the multiplication of them in many minds—and each mind, mark you, an engine of obscure but unmeasured energy. (1992, 228)

In one of his academic essays, Tolkien commented more directly:

It is an interesting question: what is this flavor, this atmosphere, this virtue that

such *rooted* works have, and which compensates for the inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments that must appear, when plots, motives, symbols, are rehandled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time, used for the expression of ideas quite different from those which produced them. (J. R. R. Tolkien 1982/1984, 72)

His subject was on this occasion the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but the remark about “inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments” seems much more relevant to *Völsunga saga*. In any case, there can be no doubt that Tolkien was extremely sensitive to what he called the “flavour” of a deep-rooted work, in which its flaws may only be the sign of fascinating antiquity. And this flavor *Völsunga saga* certainly had, regardless of its author’s limited “artistic capacity.” Could the flavor be retained, the flaws once more adjusted, and the whole story be (once again) “pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time,” this time his own? That was the issue Tolkien set himself to test, as he wrote *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* in the early 1930s.

By then, of course, he knew a great deal more than he had in 1911, not only about the saga but about what underlay it, but his increased knowledge can only have reinforced (if it did not in fact create) the opinions expressed above. One of the most surprising things about “the legend of the Völsungs and the Nibelungs” is that we have five ancient versions of it, four of them in Old Norse and one in Middle High German. The oldest version of the legend, the body of heroic poems in Old Norse preserved in the single main manuscript of Eddic poetry surviving, is incomplete; indeed it has a quite literal hole in the middle of it: the famous “gap in the Codex Regius.” At some time in the past, some medieval vandal—Tolkien preferred to think it was a medieval fan—tore out a gathering, i.e., a sheet of vellum folded to make four leaves or eight pages, and containing some 200–300 stanzas of poetry; and when the poems in the manuscript resume, Sigdrífa has mutated into Brynhild, while the main events of the Sigurd story have already taken place, including the appearance of the Nibelungs, Sigurd’s marriage to the Nibelung princess Gudrún, and his breach of faith (whatever the details) with Brynhild the ex-valkyrie. The core of the story, then, is missing. Why did Sigurd marry the princess Gudrún rather than the valkyrie Sigdrífa/Brynhild, for whom he was obviously destined as a man without fear? How did Brynhild come to marry Gudrún’s brother Gunnar? And why did Gunnar feel obliged to murder or organize the murder of his brother-in-law and blood-brother Sigurd? All these questions must have been answered,

scholars believe, in the great poem they think took up most of the space in the missing eight pages, a hypothetical and now non-existent poem they nevertheless call **Sigurðarkviða in Meiri* (“The Great Lay of Sigurd”). What a splendid poem it must have been! Only it isn’t there.

That is the provocation Tolkien must have felt, and the gap he set himself to fill by writing, in the first place, the poem to which he gave an Old Norse title, *Völsungakviða en Nýja eða Sigurðarkviða en Mesta* (“The New Lay of the Völsungs or The Greatest Lay of Sigurd”). Tolkien’s full title tells us two things. First, he meant to include the story of Sigurd’s father Sigmund the Völsung, only sketchily told in the Codex Regius, as well as the full story of the seizure of the dwarf Andvari’s treasure. Second, he meant to out-do both the Eddic *Skamma* or “Short Lay of Sigurd” and the hypothetical *Meiri* or “Great Lay,” as well as the *Brot* or “Lay Fragment,” by composing his own “*Mesta*,” though Christopher Tolkien offers for this the more modest translation “The Longest Lay” (234). The materials he had for this project were primarily *Völsunga saga*, with a cross-check given by Snorri Sturluson’s *Skáldskaparmál* epitome. Both authors almost certainly knew the “Great Lay” now missing from the Codex Regius gap, and one might think their stories could then be relied on. However, they differ in detail, sometimes on important points, and it seems from elsewhere that both authors had difficulty in always understanding what was going on in the poetry they paraphrased, which was old and unfamiliar already by their time and also habitually terse almost to (or beyond) the point of incomprehensibility. It was a provoking situation, but also in a way a promising one. So, provoking incompleteness could be useful. It was part of the creation of “daimonic force.”

“Daimonic” was furthermore an especially appropriate word for this particular exercise in re-creation. Tolkien’s aim (Christopher reports in his opening “Foreword,” here citing comments from his father’s *Letters*) was certainly “to unify the lays about the Völsungs from the Elder Edda,” or putting it another way, “to organise the Edda material dealing with Sigurd and Gunnar” (6). But this was not just a matter of getting the story straight. In a lecture given by Tolkien as part of an Oxford course on Eddic poetry, and reprinted here by Christopher, Tolkien spoke with passion about what reading the Eddic poems is like:

Few who have been through this process [of reading an Eddic poem in the original language] can have missed the sudden recognition that they had unawares met something of tremendous force, something that in parts (for it has

various parts) is still endowed with an almost demonic energy, in spite of the ruin of its form. (17)

Tolkien went on to say that, while he was a great admirer of Old English verse (none greater), it was different:

Old English verse does not attempt to hit you in the eye. To hit you in the eye was the deliberate intention of the Norse poet.

And so it is that the best (especially the most forcible of the *heroic* Eddaic poems) seem to leap across the barrier of the difficult language, and grip one in the very act of deciphering line by line. (17–18)

Tolkien, therefore, to do his subject justice, had not only to “organise” and “unify” his various materials. He had to do so in a way that would catch at least some of the “demonic energy” that he felt in the whole tradition of Eddic poetry. Quite what generates that energy is a subject that would require a book of its own, but as a preliminary suggestion, with which I think Tolkien would at least partly agree, I would propose that a lot of it comes from the habit of compressing narrative to its absolute minimum, often expressed in speeches that are deliberately, even scornfully, enigmatic. One might say that the poets took a paradoxical view of words. On the one hand, they regarded them as immensely valuable, immensely dangerous—they should not be wasted and never spoken lightly, for once said they could not be recalled, especially if they contained any element of threat or challenge, or even warning. On the other hand, they were of no value at all if not backed up by deeds. There is accordingly a great weight of allusion, suggestion, and destiny behind words that may affect to be uttered casually.

Such, then, were the intriguing tasks that Tolkien set himself to tackle in the 1930s: to unify and organize the surviving materials in such a way as to cover what had been lost in the Codex Regius gap (a narrative problem); to consider the whole question of chains of transmission (a scholarly problem); and to re-create the “almost demonic energy” he felt to be the distinguishing feature of Eddic poetry (a poetic and, for Tolkien, a metrical problem). In what follows, I consider these in that order. The next section deals primarily with Tolkien’s *Völsungakviða*, the one following with his *Guðrúnarkviða*.

Organizing the Material

The “legend of Sigurd and Guðrún” as we have it in its various ancient versions presents problems of both narrative continuity and—especially to its nineteenth-century re-workers William Morris and Richard Wagner—moral acceptability. To mention only half-a-dozen of the latter, there are the way Sigmund’s sister Signý hands over to him her sons by her husband Siggeir, to be tested and to be murdered when they fail; the incest she resorts to in order to produce their son Sinfjötli; and her suicide once her vengeance is accomplished. Less immoral but more potentially ludicrous is the honey-trick by which Sigmund escapes from and kills Siggeir’s were-wolf mother (Signý has honey smeared on Sigmund’s face; when the wolf comes to kill him, it starts to lick the honey, and Sigmund grips its tongue with his teeth so hard that the wolf’s tongue is torn out and the stocks are broken by its struggle). Equally ludicrous is the disastrous advice he gives to Sinfjötli as his son hesitates to drink poison, memorably translated by Jesse Byock as “Filter it through your mustache, son”. (51) In the later part of the legend, there is the grave doubt about Sigurd’s behavior with Brynhild while disguised as Gunnar: did he take her virginity after overpowering her physically? Can his betrayal of her be entirely excused by the “potion of oblivion”? And—a point of special interest to Tolkien—while all ancient versions are sure that Sigurd’s substitution for Gunnar was eventually betrayed by the display of a ring, none of them agrees on which ring it was, who held it, or even how many rings there were. The problems of course intertwine. Solving one may lead to difficulties with the next, as both Morris and Wagner were to find.

Tolkien’s solutions to the difficulties of his material can be stated relatively easily. He dropped much of the pointless toing-and-froing of *Völsunga saga*: there is no sister Bekkhild, no daughter Áslaug. While there is a certain amount of censorship—the honey-trick has been dropped, as has the murder of Siggeir’s sons—Signý’s incest remains, though told laconically in three stanzas (82–83). Signý’s suicide is also retained, as is Brynhild’s, but though the latter demands hawk, hound, and horse to burn with her, her request for human sacrifice found in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma* (st. 67) is deleted. Sinfjötli is poisoned as in the saga, but the advice about filtering it through his mustache has gone. More significantly, the linked issues of Brynhild’s oaths, Sigurd’s departures, what happened between Brynhild and Sigurd in the disguised wooing, and who has the ring Andvaranaut, are solved straightforwardly. Putting it as briefly as possible, the *vafhrlogi* or ring of fire was round Brynhild in the first place: Sigurd crossed it to

waken her, and she remains inside it until Sigurd returns to win her for Gunnar. Her vow was to wed only the World's Chosen, the serpent-slayer (121). She sends Sigurd away to win fame and lordship, but when he comes back in Gunnar's shape, she is bound to marry him for having succeeded in crossing the fire. Sigurd nevertheless lays his sword Gram between them and remains faithful to Gudrún and Gunnar. However, on leaving her in the morning, still asleep, he gives her Andvaranaut and takes another ring from her. Gudrún shows this ring, Brynhild's, to its former owner when the queens quarrel as proof that it was Sigurd who took it, and also tells her that she is wearing Andvaranaut, "did Gunnar get it / on Gnitaeiði?" (156).³ Brynhild has mixed motives for revenge—anger at the deception, thwarted love for Sigurd, guilt at breaking her own oath to marry only the bravest (158–159). She creates the tragedy by telling Gunnar (truthfully but misleadingly) that Sigurd betrayed him, "My bed he entered, / by my body laid him" (167). After Sigurd has been murdered she admits, "A sword lay naked / set between us" (175).

More significantly still, the whole sequence of events has been masterminded by Ódin for a particular purpose. One of the features which suggest that *Völsunga saga* combines two or more radically different legends is that while Ódin is prominent in the first section relating to the Völsungs, he plays no further part after chapter 21, apart from a brief appearance in the last chapter, 44, which is part of an originally different legendary cycle. According to Tolkien—though it is a traditional feature, going back to genuinely recorded Old Norse belief—Ódin is always thinking ahead to Ragnarök, the day of the Last Battle between, on the one side, gods and men, and, on the other side, giants and monsters. One antagonist on that day will be the Midgardsorm, the great serpent who lies coiled round the world, and Ódin needs a proven dragon-slayer to fight him. Tolkien's first section of *Völsungakviða en Nýja* is accordingly titled *Upphaf*, "Beginning," and is based on the first poem found in the Codex Regius, the *Völuspá* or "Seer-ess's Prophecy," which gives a comprehensive account of Norse mythology from Creation to Ragnarök and beyond. Tolkien made one significant change to this, however. In the Eddic poem, Thór and the Midgardsorm will fight and kill each other. In Tolkien's "Upphaf," what the seeress says is that "the deep Dragon / shall be doom of Thór" and asks "shall all be ended, / shall Earth perish?" Her answer is (63):

If in day of Doom

one deathless stands,
who death has tasted
and dies no more,
the serpent-slayer,
seed of Ódin,
then all shall not end,
nor Earth perish.

The qualifications for this hero, then, are that he shall be (1) descended from Ódin (2) but mortal, and (3) a serpent-slayer. The start of Tolkien's section *Signý* makes it clear that Sigurd is Ódin's three-greats-grandson, fulfilling condition (1). His killing of Fáfnir, advised and supported by Ódin, fulfills condition (3). And the whole involvement with Brynhild leading up to his murder ensures that he meets condition (2), tasting death. It could be argued that Sigurd, being mortal, would have died anyway, in the course of time, but a point strongly made by the Old Norse poem *Eiríksmál* is that Ódin *does not know when Ragnarök will come* therefore wants to have his picked heroes ready in Valhöll as soon as possible.⁴ In Tolkien, it is accordingly Ódin who prevents Sigurd from enjoying peace and happiness, once he has avenged his father, reconquered his inheritance, and fulfilled Brynhild's demand that he win lands and lordship. Just when his life seems set fair, a one-eyed man appears and sends him away from his fatherland with the words, "Now king thou art / of kings begotten, / a bride calls thee / over billowing seas" (136). Sigurd at this point might well assume that Ódin is sending him back to Brynhild. But Ódin is a notorious deceiver, and the bride Sigurd finds is Guðrún. Though Tolkien does not say so (following the Old Norse love of oblique statement and taciturnity), one may assume that Ódin predicts and has engineered the later course of events, setting up Sigurd's death as he set up his father Sigmund's.

Connections with Tolkien's own mythology are clear, and one theme he has added from that mythology is curiosity about the uncertain roots of human motivation. What put it into Grímhild's mind to attach Sigurd to her sons through marriage to Guðrún, and which made her prepare the potion of oblivion to blot Brynhild from his mind? Tolkien does not say, but her first whisper follows directly on Ódin's command quoted above (138). The implication is that Ódin works on Grímhild in the same way that (in Tolkien's mythology) Morgoth works on Saeros.⁵ He sends the impulse for the human to respond to. That is how the super-human powers work, though humans may perceive this as Fate, not removing but guiding mortals'

free will. Christopher Tolkien remarks (186) that “[his father’s] Ódin seems more like Manwë of his own mythology” than the enigmatic deity of Old Norse accounts, though Tolkien’s conception is by no means without enigma.

One last point in this section is that Tolkien’s Sigurd, divinely descended but himself mortal and required to endure death in order to save the world, does in those ways parallel the Christian Savior. Ronald Hutton has recently reminded us (2008) how strongly Tolkien tried, in his earlier years, to reconcile pagan and Christian mythology, attempts that he was later to moderate or even disavow. *Völsungakviða en Nýja* shows that in the early 1930s (if Christopher Tolkien’s dating of the poem’s composition is correct), a kind of reconciliation, or imitation, was still in Tolkien’s thoughts.

Reconstructing the Chain

One poem of great significance to the Tolkiens, both father and son, preserved outside the Codex Regius is the poem known variously as *Hlöðskviða*, the *Hunnenschlachtlied*, or “The Battle of the Goths and Huns.” Unlike the Codex Regius poems—which in other ways it strongly resembles—it is not preserved as a poem but as inserts in a saga narrative, *Heiðreks saga ins vitra* or “The Saga of Heidrek the Wise.”⁶ This is a *fornaldarsaga*, or “saga of old times,” just like *Völsunga saga*, but fortunately the author of *Heiðreks saga* chose to quote his source-poem in much greater detail, possibly virtually complete. Christopher Tolkien wrote an “Introduction” to an edition of the saga in 1956, followed it up with a long article on the poem (1953–1957), and then published his own edition of the saga, with facing-page translation, in 1960 (reprinted in 2010). A point he makes each time is that the phrase used in the poem, that Heithrek was killed *undir Harvaða fjöllum*, “beneath the mountains of Harvathi,” while probably meaningless to the saga-author, nevertheless preserves, by regular phonetic change—a vital point for philologists, now commonly ignored, see below—the old place-name **karpāt*: so the reference must be to the Carpathian Mountains beyond the Black Sea. The name has then crossed thousands of miles to Iceland and been preserved in fossilized form in heroic poetry for, again, close on a thousand years, going back furthermore to heroic poetry originally composed in

Gothic. “The likeliest view,” he comments, “is that the oldest ‘layer’ of the material of the poem goes back to ancient wars of the Gothic kingdoms on the northern shores of the Black Sea in the later fourth and early fifth centuries, soon after the first appearance of the Huns” (1956, xiii). Two important corollaries for Tolkien Sr.’s *Guðrúnarkviða* are these. First, heroic poetry was quite capable of preserving genuine historical information for long periods. But second, it was likely not to be understood, though, “pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time,” it might well contribute to the “daimonic force” created by repeated re-handlings. These corollaries gave Tolkien Sr. both some hints and some room for the exercise of imagination.

It was realized long ago that the story of the Nibelungs, at least, was based on historical events, and in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, Christopher gives a full account of the facts in his “Appendix A, Origins of the Legend.” In brief, the names of Gunnar and his father Gjúki are derived “by regular phonetic change” (340) from the names of Burgundian kings recorded in the early sixth century, Gundahari and Gibica. Gundahari appears in Roman sources as the king who, in 435, was defeated by the Roman general Aetius, and in 437, was crushingly defeated and killed by an onslaught of the Huns who destroyed the kingdom that the Germanic Burgundians had established round Worms on the Rhine. As Christopher notes (228), these events are “very remarkably” remembered in heroic poetry by the phrases *vin Borgunda*, “lord of the Burgundians,” applied to Gunnar in the Eddic poem *Atlakviða*, and *wine Burgenda*, applied to the same man in the Old English poem *Waldere*; while the belief that the dynasty was wiped out by Attila (expressed in *Atlakviða*, in the longer *Atlamál*, and also in *Völsunga saga*) is a natural if incorrect deduction from the fact that it really was wiped out by the Huns, though not by the most famous of them, who was however active at the time (Attila died in 453). These facts form the basis for the story that became Tolkien’s second poem, *Guðrúnarkviða en Nýja eða Dráp Niflunga*, “The New Lay of Gudrún or the Slaying of the Nibelungs.”

His main materials here were the two Eddic poems just mentioned, *Atlakviða* and *Atlamál in grœnlenzco*, “The Greenlandic Poem of Atli,”⁷ but the Codex Regius manuscript also contains four poems dealing with the woes of Gudrún, of which the first is sometimes called *Guðrúnarkviða in forna*, “The Old Lay of Gudrún,” with, in addition, two poems carrying her story on to attach it to the death of the Gothic king Iormunrek, or Ermanaric. Tolkien rejected the last two, for reasons to be given, but paid attention to the others. Christopher notes

that his father commented that, contrary to popular scholarly opinion, he was more interested in Gudrún, “who is usually slighted, and considered as of secondary interest,” than he was in Brynhild (55). Yet her story also contains evident problems of history and psychology.

To take the latter first, by all accounts, Gudrún has seen her brothers murder her husband Sigurd. They then marry her off to Attila the Hun, who nevertheless decides to trap and kill her brothers, whether in revenge for an uncle, as some say, or out of greed for the dragon-gold the brothers have stolen from Sigurd, as Tolkien preferred to tell the story. Whose side should she be on here? She has no reason at all to love her brothers. In the Old Norse poems, however, she tries to warn them, and after they have been killed, she takes dreadful revenge on Atli (rather as Signý did on Siggeir) by killing her own children by him, serving their flesh up for him to eat, stabbing him, and burning his hall down. By contrast, in the German *Nibelungenlied*, it is she who is behind the whole plot to kill her brothers, and she has been transformed into a raging virago, who beheads her last surviving brother with her own hands, and *ze stücken was gehouwen*, “was hewed in pieces” by the hero Hildebrand, provoked into striking a woman by her behavior (ed. Bartsch and de Boor 571). Tolkien accepted the Norse version, but it does raise the questions of how she was persuaded to marry again—he rejected *Völsunga saga*’s use of the “potion of oblivion” trick with some scorn⁸—and how she got away with the murder of Atli, which seems once more to have some slight if mistaken historical basis.

The historical elements of both the Codex Regius and the *Nibelungen-lied* were in any case quite unacceptable to Tolkien, for both drew in the Goths, a people in whose history and language Tolkien always took a great interest, in ways he knew were impossible. The Codex Regius follows up its account of the Fall of the Nibelungs (which must be dated 437, see above) by having Gudrún survive, escape, marry again, and send her sons to avenge the death of her daughter by Sigurd at the hands of the Gothic king Ermanaric. But the latter is known, from accounts by Roman historians, to have died some sixty years earlier. By contrast, in the *Nibelungenlied*, the desperate resistance of Gunther and Hagen (i.e., Gunnar and Högni) is broken not by the warriors of Etzel (Atli), but by the intervention of a hostage at Etzel’s court, one Dietrich. But Dietrich is to be equated with another historical Gothic king, this time Theodoric the Great—who, however, was not born until after Attila’s death and died in 526. The one Gothic king drawn into the legend is two generations too

early and the other at least a generation too late. Tolkien could not tolerate discrepancies of that order. But he did not want to lose the Goths, especially in view of the remarkable poem mentioned above, “The Battle of the Goths and Huns.”

Tolkien’s solutions went like this. His poem begins with a short statement of the political situation after the death of Sigurd: Atli is known to be gathering his armies, Gunnar and Högni think they cannot defeat him without Sigurd, and their mother proposes that they marry Gudrún to him to make him an ally instead of an enemy. Gudrún, however, is working on a tapestry of the history of the Völsungs and the deeds of her dead husband, still burns with hatred of her brothers, and has no wish to be married off again. She is brought into line not by a potion but by the threats of her witch-wife mother: “Dark hung her eyes / daunting Gudrún, / deep and dreadful, / dire with purpose” (262). The marriage does not work, for Atli remains obsessed by the Nibelungs’ gold; he mutters of treachery in his sleep, and Gudrún hears him. When Atli sends his messenger (Knéfröðr in the *Atlakviða*, Vingi in *Atlamál*) to invite the brothers to his hall, Gudrún sends them warning. The two Eddic poems differ in how this is communicated: Tolkien used both versions. Högni’s “reading” of the wolf-hair in stanza 44 is answered by Gunnar’s reading of the runes in stanza 45. Grímhild says that the runes seem to have been altered in stanza 48, and Gunnar decides to reject the invitation. But he is then taunted by Vingi with being led by a woman, and after further exchanges, Gunnar—“deep had he drunken”—changes his mind, with Tolkien keeping some of Gunnar’s enigmatic cry from *Atlakviða*: “Let wolves then wield / wealth of Niflungs! / Bears shall harbour / in barren courtyards” (st. 55). Högni comments that they have taken Grímhild’s advice before and regretted it, and now he fears they will regret not taking it. The Nibelungs then ride to Atli’s court and are immediately attacked, though they manage to kill Vingi before the battle is joined.

Tolkien then introduces a completely original feature. In a letter written to Christopher on 21 February 1958, he had remarked, *à propos* of a paper Christopher had read on “the heroes of northern legend as seen in different fashion by Germanic poets and Roman writers,” that what really thrilled him about this was a point Christopher had made casually, that the name “Attila” itself seems not to be Hunnish at all, but Gothic, “a diminutive of *atta*, the Gothic for ‘father’” (ed. Carpenter 447). What this implies is that some Goths, at least, liked and respected Attila, calling him “little father” or even

“daddy.” While Goths and Huns had clashed violently in the fourth century, then—and see the comments on “The Battle of Goths and Huns” above—by the fifth century, many Goths had joined the Hunnish armies: the Battle of the Catalaunian Plains, which may well be seen as the model for Tolkien’s own Battle of the Pelennor Fields, was fought between Huns and Ostrogoths, on the one side, and Romans and Visigoths, on the other, the Visigothic king Theodoric being killed in victory like Théoden, overridden by his own cavalry-charge (as noted by Christopher 344–345). But Tolkien must have reflected, had the Gothic allies of the Huns quite forgotten their own traditions? There is a hint that they had not in Tolkien’s “Lay of the Völsungs,” when Gunnar entertains Sigurd with songs of the Gothic past, clearly similar to (or the same as) “The Battle of the Goths and Huns,” which Tolkien assimilates to the Nibelung legend by bringing in the Burgundians and making them responsible for the death of Atli’s shadowy brother Budli (131–132).

In the “Lay of Gudrún,” what happens is that Gudrún, torn between hatred of her brothers and hatred of Atli, calls on Atli’s Gothic allies to remember old griefs, “wars in Mirkwood / and wars of old,” and Gunnar, responding, begins again to sing “of Iormunrek / earth-shadowing king; / of Angantýr / and old battles, / of Dylgja, Dúnheið, / and Danpar’s walls” (280–281). The name “Iormunrek” places that king correctly in Attila’s past, and the other four names are taken from “The Battle of the Goths and Huns,” which also mentions “Mirkwood.” The Goths in Atli’s court change sides, and Tolkien turns what in both Eddic poems had been a brief clash into a full-scale battle, as in the *Nibelungenlied*. As the Nibelungs and their new allies gain control, Gunnar and Högni have Atli in their power, but again someone (seemingly both of the brothers together) says fatal words, reminding Gudrún, “Fell-shapen fates / will force us ever / as wife to give thee, / and a widow make thee!” (283). This reminder of their dealings with Sigurd impels Gudrún to tell them not to repeat their crime and let Atli go, which they do. He goes off to find Hunnish reinforcements, and the scene is then set (again, as in the *Nibelungenlied*) for the traditional motif of a gallant hall-defense, terminated by the burning of the hall over the defenders.

In the stanzas that follow, Tolkien indeed seems to be working through a repertoire of traditional motifs taken from the few Old English and Old Norse heroic poems that survive. The Old English *Finnsburg Fragment* opens apparently just after a watchman has seen something in the dark, and asked, is that dawn, or dragon-fire, or are

the hall-gables burning? His leader Hnæf replies that it is none of those things, but instead “woeful deeds arise, which will bring about this people’s destruction.” He knows (but, being a hero, does not explicitly say) that what the watchman has seen is moonlight glinting on weapons. Tolkien includes a similar exchange between Högni and Gunnar in stanzas 96–98, and Christopher reports (325) that his father was aware of a parallel scene in the *Nibelungenlied*. There is a further echo of the *Finnsburg Fragment* in stanza 102 (the hall-defenders fighting for five days) and echoes of *Beowulf* in stanzas 130 and 142 (respectively, the idea of gold lying “as useless to man / as of yore it proved,” cf. *Beowulf* l. 3168, and the rising smoke of the funeral pyre, cf. *Beowulf* l. 3144). There is perhaps a memory of the few lines of the Old Norse *Bjarkamál* still surviving in the “Wake now!” call of stanza 99, though the *Finnsburg Fragment* also opens with an awakening scene.⁹

Once Gunnar and Högni have been taken alive by Atli, Tolkien was faced with the challenge of one of the major demonstrations of “daimonic force” in the legend and of “almost demonic energy” in Old Norse poetry. It has to be said (though nowadays the thought is often shunned) that Old Norse literature has a marked mean streak, with a wholly distinctive element of cruel humor based on “turning the tables” or “having the last laugh,” exemplified in the death of Högni. The whole point of the story is to show that the true hero is not Högni, though he is the one who puts up a fierce fight before being taken. It is Gunnar: because he thinks ahead and outwits his enemy, denying his enemy victory even when completely helpless, and even more because his victory-in-death rests on exactly that “reliance upon self and indomitable will,” which Tolkien thought to be at the heart of the Northern heroic ethos (24).

The whole thoroughly enigmatic scene is replayed at greater length in *Atlamál*, with further rough humor at the expense of Hialli, now demoted to scullion, while the two versions were “rather crudely combined” (327) in *Völsunga saga*. But Tolkien too felt a need to expand and explain. In his account, Gunnar says why he wants his brother’s heart, in stanza 118: because half of the treasure belongs to Högni. The Huns seize Hialli instead because (st. 121) they fear Gudrún’s anger if her brother is killed. Tolkien also introduced the wails of Hialli from *Atlamál* (sts. 122–123) and Högni’s contemptuous offer to die instead to silence the shrieking (st. 124). Only then do we have the heart-trick scene, Gunnar’s death in the snake-pit, Gudrún’s awful cannibalistic revenge, and—for Tolkien rejected the two poems

that carried her story on unhistorically to the death of Iormunrek—her final lament and death. The expansions perhaps diminish the “demonic energy” of *Atlakviða*, but one has to concede that even modern scholars well-versed in the language find this, and other Eddic poems, all but impossible to understand.

Reproducing Style and Meter

In a recent article, I quote approvingly Chris Jones’s recent comment (2006, 243) that:

There is a good case to be made for suggesting that Tolkien is the most popular poet of the twentieth century, certainly the verse embedded throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and his other fictions of Middle Earth must count as the most widely read poetry of the century.

Much of this verse is written in alliterative meter, and Tolkien’s corpus of alliterative poetry, in Old English, and in modern English following the rules of Old English, Middle English, and now Old Norse, is an extraordinarily extensive one. I commented in the article just mentioned, however, that while Tolkien “stuck determinedly to the project of writing modern English in an Old English way ... my conclusion is that he got markedly better at it.” I would add that while it is rather easy to write alliterative poetry in modern English, it is hard to write it well, especially if one tries to follow the strict ancient rules of meter. It can be done: poems like the Lament for Théoden (J. R. R. Tolkien 1987, V, iii), Éomer’s three-line epitaph for Théoden (V, vi), the Song of the Mounds of Mundburg (V, vi), and Gléowine’s dirge (VI, vi) catch brilliantly the unexpected subtleties and sub-surface variations of the old verse form. But it took Tolkien a long time to learn how to do it. There is, I believe, constant development and improvement in Tolkien’s handling of alliterative verse from “The Lay of the Children of Húrin” in *Lays of Beleriand* (early 1920s), through “King Sheave” in *Lost Road* (a decade later), and on to “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” and *Lord of the Rings* (both published in the early 1950s, but both after a long period of gestation). *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* fits by date into the middle of this sequence, but it is different in that the model is Old Norse rather than Old English, though the particular meter Tolkien chose, *fornyrðislag* or “old lore meter”—he preferred to call it *kviðuhátt*, the meter for poems like

Atlakviða, *Hlöðskviða*, *Völundarkviða*, etc. (45)—is close to that of Old English and no doubt shares a common origin.

The issue for Tolkien, however, was how to “hit you in the eye” in a markedly un-Old English way, and he went about it through (1) compression, (2) parallelism, and (3) variation. All three sets of devices, it should be noted, demand an ability in the reader not well-developed these days: the ability *to listen very hard*. Vital also to the aesthetic of Old English and Old Norse poetry is the belief that the poet’s art consists largely in the skill of conveying ever-greater amounts of meaning through ever-smaller verbal or grammatical or phonetic changes.

Compression can be seen at all levels of Tolkien’s poems, as in their Norse originals—Christopher comments, in his note on “The Verse-Form of the Poems” (45–50), on the “weighty packing of the language in sense and form” in the latter (48), which his father also clearly aimed at. One sees it in individual lines and half-lines. The latter fall into the familiar “Five Types” of stress-pattern seen in both Old English and Old Norse poetry, Tolkien’s 1940 explanation of which (reprinted in Tolkien 1982/1984) is repeated in Christopher’s note, with further exemplification. Old Norse is more monosyllabic than Old English, however, and Tolkien’s half-lines are notably curt, nearly always four or five syllables. The problem for him was the continuous grammatical need, in modern English, for little unstressed words, which are liable to come pattering in. The enemies of the gods, beaten back from Asgard, “ringed Earth around / with roaring sea / and mountains of ice / (on the) margin (of the) world” (62). Could the bracketed words have been eliminated? “On the world’s margin” would be briefer. But that would contradict the most important rule of this verse form, which is that the first stress of the second half-line is the “head-stave” and *must* carry alliteration. Again and again (if one tries to write alliterative verse), prepositions, definite and indefinite articles, and auxiliary verbs all keep trying to force their way in, destroying the stress-patterns, and tending to create the x / x / x pattern so normal in modern English, but tolerated only in exceptional circumstances by the ancient poets. Tolkien exerted himself to keep these trivial insertions out, nearly all the time, such that one notices when he failed. But the resultant effect is clipped, sometimes arguably too much so. Fáfnir the dragon as he dies warns Sigurd that his gold “gleams with evil.” Sigurd replies, in effect, that he accepts the warning but will take the gold anyway: “Life each must leave / on his latest day, / yet gold gladly / will grasp living” (110). In normal

modern English, this would be something like, “Everyone has to leave life / on his last day / but as long as he’s alive / everyone will grasp gold gladly.” One sees how the normal version runs on and loses force, but a modern reader is liable to hesitate before understanding that “living” goes with “each” twelve words earlier and means “each living person” or “each person while alive.”

Compression is easier to follow at the level of line and stanza. At the line level, Tolkien frequently uses the device of “causal parataxis,” short main clauses with connecting conjunctions left to be inferred. In the beginning, writes Tolkien, “To the world came war: / the walls of Gods / giants beleaguered; / joy was ended” (61). There is an unspoken “when” between lines 1 and 2, and an unspoken “so” between lines 3 and 4. A similar device is “adversative asyndeton.” Of Sigurd’s mother Sigrínn it is said, “Seven sons of kings / sued the maiden: / Sigmund took her; / sails were hoisted” (93). Again, there is an unspoken but powerful “But, just the same, for all that” between lines 2 and 3, and an unspoken “and” between lines 3 and 4. The reader / listener has to co-operate to perceive these effects, and the greatest effect is perhaps a sense of certainty, inescapability: there is no need to point out connections, that is the way things went, the way they go. I know no name for the next particular rhetorical device, but of the same type is the account of the death of Sinfjötli. Twice his stepmother offers him poison, twice he rejects it, and twice his invulnerable father takes the horn instead. The third time his stepmother dares him: “heroes ask not / help in drinking—/ if drink thou darest, drink Sinfjötli!” (90). The next lines are “Dead Sinfjötli / drinking stumbled.” This time his father must not have intervened—as he does, disastrously, in *Völsunga saga*, see above— this time the son must have drunk the poison. But that has to be inferred. On occasion inference is not easy for anyone who does not know the story already. How did Sigmund break his shackles and tear the tongue from the wolf who ate his brothers? I think it is impossible to tell (82). Nor is it clear what is happening in the next three critical stanzas, of Signý’s incest, still less why she takes this ultimate measure. Abrupt shifts are vital to the whole poetic technique. It is part of what Tolkien meant by “hitting you in the eye.”

Devices of parallelism and variation meanwhile work in the opposite way to guide the (alert) reader, and these—again a vital part of Old-Northern poetic technique—work like the silent clues to emotion beneath the heroes’ dead-pan responses. At the simplest level, there is direct repetition. Christopher notes that his father praised “the

supreme vigour and economical force” of four lines from the *Brot af Sigurðarkviðu* (233), and they are echoed in Tolkien’s re-creation when Gunnar complains: “Evil wrought Sigurd: / oaths he swore me, / oaths he swore me, all belied them” (168). The original is, however, slightly different, repetition varied by chiasmus (ed. Neckel I, 198, given here with my literal translation):

Mér hefir Sigurðr
selda eiða,
eiða selda,
alla logna.

[To me has Sigurd given oaths, oaths given, all belied.]

But the repetition here is not quite the same, for main stress in l. 2 falls on *selda*, in l. 3 on *eiða*—they are the words that carry alliteration. The same device is extended by Tolkien to convey the betrayed Brynhild’s confusion, as she says to herself, “Mine own must I have / or anguish suffer, / or suffer anguish / Sigurd losing” (157). Are ll. 3–4 here saying the same thing as ll. 1–2 (“I must have Sigurd”) or opposite things (“I will suffer [a] if I abandon my own husband and pursue Sigurd, but also [b] if I stay with him and lose Sigurd”)? The reader has to decide what is probable. Still more complex patterns are possible. When Sigurd is murdered in his bed, the attention switches abruptly to Gudrún’s situation: “In sweet embrace / to sleep she went, / to grief unending / Gudrún wakened” (173). Clearly sleep and wake are violently opposed, as are sweetness and grief; but “to sleep” and “to grief” are also paralleled by the shared preposition and their position at the start of successive lines. On the surface ll. 2 and 3 are parallel, but the real parallels are in 1 / 3 and 2 / 4. Yet again, the reader has to be alert to catch the sense and the force of the violent oppositions presented.

More could be said about the way that the alliterative verse form favors both violent opposition and violent reinforcement by its concentration on the four stressed words in each full line. Tolkien liked very much the device—and see the remark above about what is “vital to the aesthetic” of Old English and Old Norse poetry—which some call “pararhyme,” opposing two syllables that begin and end the same way but have different vowels and, often, opposite senses. Brynhild exploits it in her false accusation to Gunnar against Sigurd: “My *bed* he entered, / by my *body* laid him” (167). The two similar syllables sound as if they are backing each other up, but they do not: later she confesses that he entered her bed but *not* her body, for all

night between them, “*Gram lay grimly / gleaming sheathless.*” Again and again stanzas present ever-changing patterns of connection/opposition. The largely monosyllabic vocabulary and the relatively simple grammatical structures appear straightforward, but as with the heroes’ unmoving faces and laconic speeches, turmoil can be glimpsed beneath.

One example, out of many, can be used to show how repetition-with-variation works over longer stretches, even as a device to hold the whole plot together. Sigurd takes Gunnar’s place to ride over the *vafþrlogi* (148): “Oaths swore Sigurd, / all fulfilled them.” Twenty pages later (as quoted above), Gunnar says in contradiction, “oaths he swore me, / all belied them.” Struck his death-blow, Sigurd’s last words are, “oaths I swore him, / all fulfilled them”—while just before he had said, switching the accusation to Brynhild, “worst she dealt me, / worst belied me” (174). Note that in the first three cases, the alliteration falls on “oaths” and “all,” both half-lines in each case being a straightforward A-type, / x / x. But the pivotal moment of the whole of Tolkien’s *Völsungakviða* could be said to be the moment when Brynhild enters Gunnar’s hall as Gunnar’s wife—and the potion of oblivion ceases to work on Sigurd, so that he remembers his former betrothal to Brynhild and realizes what he has so disastrously done. It need hardly be said that he remains outwardly impassive: “As stone carven, / stern, unbending, / he sat unsmiling, / no sign making” (154). The sign of inner turmoil here is no more than a slight variation of words: “oaths were remembered, / all unfulfilled.” Acute listeners, however, should realize that the second half-line, similar though it is to two of those just cited, is different from all of them in being *impossible to scan correctly*. As said above, the first rule of *fornyrðislag* is that the first stress of the second half-line is the “head-stave” and *must* carry alliteration, while the second rule is that the second stress of the second half-line *must never* carry alliteration. With “all unfulfilled,” an aware reader (even more, a reader-out-loud) will certainly put the first stress on “all,” to alliterate as usual with “oaths,” and then try to put the second one on “ful-” or “-filled.” Neither can possibly work. “ALL unfulFILLED” is almost possible, as a dubious E-type half-line, but obviously the main stress has to go on “un”—that is the most important fact being stated! So one has “ALL UNfulfilled,” and the result breaks at least three metrical rules at once: two alliterating stresses in the second half-line where there must only be one, stress and alliteration falling the second time on the one place where it must not go, and stress and alliteration falling on a mere

negative prefix. Sigurd's terrible moment of recognition is thus signaled by a dreadful discord, a metrical jangle the worse for being so close to an expected and predictable metrical harmony. Small change, big effect: that is what skillful poets aim at within this subtle and allusive tradition, committed above all to understatement. The device of near-repetition is, as Christopher notes (205), "characteristic," often used, never in quite the same way.

Those familiar with *Lord of the Rings* will note also that in this much earlier work, Tolkien was trying a few things out that he then did not forget. As Sigurd rides back to his ancestral home, "Steeds went striding, / stonefire glinted" (137, 273), and with slight variation, "Steeds were striding, / stonefire glinting" (147): compare the third line of the Song of the Mounds of Mundburg, "Steeds went striding to the Stoningland" (i.e., after Gondor 1987, V, vi). The line repeated twice in the paragraph above reappears again, with further slight variation, applied to Théoden in the Lament for Théoden, "oaths he had taken, all fulfilled them" (1987, V, iii). The device of exchanging proverbs in a confrontation—a device with clear Old English and Old Norse models—is used between Elrond and Gimli as the Fellowship leaves Rivendell, and between King Dáin and Sauron's messenger, related by Glóin, at the Council of Elrond, but it is there also in the scene between Sigurd and Regin, as they argue whether it is the sword Gram or Sigurd's own stout heart that deserves the reward for killing Fáfnir (112). Tolkien, as we now know, was thrifty and threw little away, but he was prodigal with his time, always ready to experiment and to learn from the results.¹⁰

Some Conclusions

Christopher Tolkien writes that he did not want his father's poems to appear after eighty years "with a great weight of scholarly discussion hung about their necks," especially with regard to "the doubts and debates of 'Eddaic' and 'Nibelung' scholarship" (6). Nevertheless, as said at the start of this chapter, the whole question of the relationship between the different forms of the legend and the mystery of what went missing in the great gap of the Codex Regius was long recognized as the *Königsproblem* or "master-problem" of Germanic philology, as a guide to which one can best recommend Theodore

Andersson's *The Legend of Brynhild* and A. T. Hatto's "Introduction to a Second Reading" of the poem, suffixed to his 1969 translation of *The Nibelungenlied*. Hatto's piece also makes it clear that it is a good idea to read the story first before engaging with the debates it has provoked, and fortunately this will be the case with the majority of Tolkien's readers.¹¹

A further and welcome aspect of the publication of these poems is that they expose at length and in detail the possibilities of writing in alliterative verse. There is an argument to say that alliterative verse, with its strong stresses, suits the genius even of the modern English language better than the rhymed tradition that has been imposed on it from languages much richer in rhymes (French and Italian), and not marked by the strong front-stressing of English; and the feeling has led to a surprising number of experiments by modern English poets, as studied by Chris Jones in his book mentioned above: Jones studies Pound, Auden, Edwin Morgan, and Heaney, but not Tolkien, and notes that his list could be extended. Nevertheless, poets in this area have had precious little guidance from scholars. Tolkien observed many years ago, in his 1936 lecture on *Beowulf*, that study of that poem, while "rich in many departments," was poor in criticism of it as poetry (1982/1984, 5). His lecture certainly directed critics to considering *Beowulf* as a work of art rather than a historical document, but when it comes to the *mechanics* of alliterative poetry, its distinctive devices and underlying aesthetic, the situation has hardly changed at all over a long lifetime. One result, surely, is that people still have to be taught how to listen to alliterative poetry, as Tolkien taught himself, over many years and with a marked learning curve, to write it.

Finally, Tolkien certainly succeeded in his stated goal of "organising" and "unifying" the Eddic material about the Völsungs and making a coherent story out of it. Did he succeed in solving what Christopher calls "the most intractable problem of the Norse Völsung legend, the treatment in the sources of Brynhild in two altogether distinct and incompatible ways" (220)? His father wrote, commenting once more on the failings of the author of *Völsungs saga*, that "a better artist could have retained all that was necessary of the two divergent Brynhild-heroines and not made them so obscure and indeed contradictory and unintelligible" (245). Was he, then, that "better artist"? And did he succeed in unifying the even more contradictory images of the widowed Gudrún found in the ancient sources, fratricidal virago or woman supremely wounded? Here each reader must be his or her own judge.

One thing, however, surely remains as obscure in Tolkien as in any of the ancient sources. Why in the world did Sigurd, leaving Brynhild asleep after lying with her in Gunnar's shape—never having touched her, razor-edged Gram drawn between them—why did he take her ring and slip the dwarf-cursed ring Andvaranaut on to her finger, for all the world as if it was the traditional “morning-gift”? It was a disastrous error. Was it a gesture of love, as if some unconscious memory of his former pledge was stirring beneath the potion of oblivion? Was taking her ring a gesture of triumph, springing from desire to have a memento, even a trophy? The author of the *Nibelungenlied*, writing the same scene, confesses that he does not know why he did it: “I do not know whether he did that through his high spirit [*hohen muot*]” (ed. Bartsch and de Boor 116, my translation, and note Gunnar's equally disastrous, equally enigmatic decision to journey to Atli's court, *af móði stórom*). But even if we were assured that the cause was the hero's “high spirit,” which we are not, that phrase covers a number of emotions. Perhaps that is how Fate works. Or Ódin.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the late and sorely missed Maggie Burns, an alumna of King Edward's High School (the girls' school across the drive from Tolkien's), for sending me a scan of this item.
2. For commentary on Morris and Wagner, see the longer version of this article in *Tolkien Studies* 7.
3. The two-ring motif is logically required, for if Guðrún had a ring given by Brynhild to her wooer, she might have got it from her brother Gunnar. The decisive fact is that Gunnar never could have had possession of Andvaranaut to give to Brynhild. Snorri also includes this taunt.
4. The point is made, if as usual allusively, in the poem *Eiríksmál*, composed as a memorial for King Eirik Bloodaxe, killed at Stainmoor in England in 954.
5. See Mablung's ominous remark in the “Narn i Hîn Húrin,” *Unfinished Tales* 81.
6. On poems in the *fornaldarsögur*, see further Margaret Clunies Ross, [Chapter 9](#), this volume.
7. Both poems are actually labelled as “Greenlandic” in the Codex Regius, but it seems much more likely to be true of the second one, notably smaller in scale than the first, as if the product of an isolated and impoverished community.
8. Christopher quotes him as writing that the first “draft of oblivion” was invented

- just to get over the difficulties of the double betrothal of Brynhild, but bringing it on again to explain Guðrún was deplorable. “[T]hese drinks of Grimhild are too powerful or too powerless: why not give one to Atli too, and make him forget the Hoard?” (315–316).
9. Tolkien’s wide familiarity with Northern heroic tradition appears in several places elsewhere. One stanza of *Völsungakviða* (149) echoes a lost poem quoted briefly by Snorri, the *Alsvinnsmál* (a list of heroes’ horses). Two pages later, stanzas 25–26 draw on two stanzas of another lost poem (perhaps **Sigurðarkviða in Meiri* itself) quoted in *Völsunga saga*. Tolkien, however, rejected another stanza quoted in the saga as exaggerated: in it Sigurd’s grief swells his heart so much that the links of his mailshirt snap (yet another case of emotion conveyed by involuntary physical reaction), see p. 237.
 10. As for instance in the decision to translate Old Norse verse into Old English verse, reproduced in Appendix C, 368–377. What could he learn from that? Who knows? That is proper research, though unconventional.
 11. A brief resumé of the story as told by Tolkien, prepared by Christopher, is available at <http://www.tolkienestate.com/sigurd-and-gudrun>, with suggested links for further information. One addition should be made to the data on the link to “the Sigurd Stones.” Surprisingly, and in consequence little known, there are clear carvings of several scenes from the Sigurd legend on the façade of the church of Sta. María la Real, in Sangüesa, Northern Spain; see Breeze 1991. It is thought that they were put there by Norman masons in the twelfth century, but how the masons explained their work to their ecclesiastical employers cannot be guessed. The carvings show that the legend remained alive, even outside Scandinavia, well into the central Middle Ages.

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